



**AN OUTLINE HISTORY  
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

*By the same author*

A COURSE IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

A PRELIMINARY ENGLISH COURSE

A JUNIOR ENGLISH COURSE

A MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH COURSE

THE GROUNDWORK OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

EXERCISES IN LITERARY APPRECIATION

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MODERN TRAVEL. An Anthology. (*The Scholar's Library*)

MODERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. An Anthology. (*The Scholar's  
Library*)

AN OUTLINE HISTORY  
OF THE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY  
FREDERICK T. WOOD

*SECOND EDITION*

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**XCVI**

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

IN the present edition minor changes have been made throughout the book, but the more radical and extensive ones occur in the second half of it. A number of examples that had become somewhat dated by the lapse of time, or had been treated as neologisms, have been removed, and many new words that have come into English over the past twenty-five years have been added. The influence of American English upon that of Great Britain has been dealt with at greater length than before, and the chapter on Standard English has been considerably revised in the light of the changing attitude towards the whole conception of a 'standard' of speech. Something has been said on the 'U' and 'non-U' debate, and on the influence of television and present-day journalism on both the spoken and the written forms of the language. Finally, the bibliography has been revised and brought more up to date by the inclusion of works which have appeared since the book was originally published in 1941.

F. T. W.

*March 1967*



## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THE present book has been written in the belief that there is room for a work which will serve as an introduction to the history of the English language for those who have little or no previous knowledge of the subject. A number of excellent treatises by specialists in this branch of English studies already exist (a selection of them is given in the bibliography), but for the most part they are not books for the beginner. Either they are too detailed for his requirements, or they assume, and demand, a certain amount of previous knowledge which he does not possess. There are, too, several very competent and interesting books on etymology and the history of words, but this is only one side of language study. The present volume claims to be no more than an outline and an introduction, but at the same time it seeks to treat all the more important aspects of the subject—vocabulary, grammar, syntax, pronunciation, sound-change, etymology, etc.—in as simple, clear and methodical a way as possible.

The type of reader I have had in mind is, on the one hand, the young student who is required by certain examining bodies to have some acquaintance with the history of the English language for the purpose of their Higher School Certificate and similar examinations, and, on the other, the more general reader who wishes to know something of how his mother-tongue has developed. For this reason I have tried to avoid a too academic approach to the subject and have striven rather to give it a living interest by keeping the attention, even when dealing with past developments, upon

English as it is spoken and written today. Thus in touching upon sound-changes, for instance, mention has been made only of those which have left a definite mark upon the English of the twentieth century and help to explain its chief characteristics, as well as its apparent anomalies or peculiarities; those which are of historical interest only have been excluded. Words chosen for discussion and illustration have been selected on the same principle.

Obviously, the more languages a student of English can read, the better equipped will he be for his task and the easier and the more vitally real will it become for him. But here again I have assumed no more than would normally be acquired as the result of a grammar school education: that is to say, a working knowledge of French and Latin, none of Old English, and little of Middle English outside Chaucer. Should it happen that one is acquainted with any other languages, especially German, so much the better. In dealing with pronunciation and sound-change, too, as far as possible the employment of phonetics has been avoided. Instead an attempt has been made to indicate sounds by reference to similar ones in present-day English words.

My debt to such authorities as Jespersen, Bradley, Wyld and Weekley will be evident throughout the text, often when no specific mention is made of it; and like all students of, and writers upon, the English language, I have had frequent recourse to the Oxford Dictionary, whose help has been indispensable. I must also thank a number of personal friends for valuable assistance: viz., my colleagues Mr. D. H. Carding-Wells and Mr. J. A. Over for advice on the Spanish and Italian contributions respectively, Mr. G. A. Birkett, Head of the Department of Russian in Sheffield University, for help with Russian words in English, Dr.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Imrich Tarjan for collaboration on Czech and Hungarian words, and Dr. Clarice E. Tyler for reading the entire typescript and offering a number of valuable suggestions.

FREDERICK T. WOOD

SHEFFIELD

*September, 1941*



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## CHAPTER I

### THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

BEFORE setting out to make a study of the development of the English language over the past fifteen hundred years or more, there are one or two elementary facts concerning language in general that we should get clearly into our minds. It may perhaps be felt that they are sufficiently obvious to most intelligent people to render any mention of them unnecessary; but they are, nevertheless, apt to be overlooked, and since it is impossible to appreciate fully the significance of the various forces which have been at work behind and within our language, governing, determining and directing its evolution, unless we are first of all aware of these few essential facts concerning language in general, they are set down here as briefly and as concisely as possible.

The first thing to realise is that language is primarily something that is spoken, not written. The introduction of a system of recording thought and speech by writing (and later by printing) was a very important step forward, and without it we should be very largely ignorant of the ways of life and the modes of thought of our ancestors. We should be completely shut off from the great minds of the past, and it would be quite impossible for us to undertake such a study as the present one, since we should have no means of knowing anything about the language of the people who lived in this country five hundred or a thousand years ago, and still less should we be in a position to relate that language to the tongues spoken in other countries. The

only means we have of knowing the kind of language used by Julius Caesar or by King Alfred the Great—the words they employed and the grammatical structure of their speech—is by studying such contemporary written documents as have survived; and in the main that will still be the method employed by future generations when they wish to investigate the language of our own age, though they will have an additional convenience in the invention of the gramophone and the tape-recorder. Now because of this necessity of relying on written documentary records for linguistic research and because reading and writing have come to occupy so large a place in our daily lives, there has grown up a tendency to think of language in terms of the written or printed word.<sup>1</sup> But printing and writing are only substitutes for speech. In its primary sense language, as the term implies, is oral. That printing and writing have certainly had an influence on the development of language—usually displaying a conservative tendency, inimical to too rapid change or innovation—we shall see at a later stage of this book; but in the last resort what is written is determined by what is said.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is probably behind the practice, more frequent in the nineteenth century than today, of writing the indefinite article as *an* before a letter *u*, even if it is pronounced with the *y* sound; e.g. *an universal law*, *an unique specimen*, etc. Even Cardinal Newman called his famous work *The Idea of an University*.

<sup>2</sup> I am, of course, aware that we speak of ‘sign language’, ‘deaf and dumb language’, etc., and that many authorities consider that the earliest language was not spoken but rather a matter of gesture (see pp. 7-8), but in applying the term *language* to these methods of communication we are really using it metaphorically; and in any case they all lie outside the sphere of linguistic study. The term *language*, as used of historical times, refers solely to communication by means of speech or writing, and of these two the former is the basic and primary one.

Secondly we must realise that language is (and always has been) evolutionary, not static. Change is constantly going on. If we look at a passage from Chaucer (who was writing towards the end of the fourteenth century) and compare it with the English that is spoken and written to-day, it is obvious that the language has altered considerably in the intervening five hundred years or more; and if we go even further back to the early Anglo-Saxon period, we find an even greater difference. In fact, Anglo-Saxon is much more unlike Chaucer's English than Chaucer's English is unlike ours.<sup>1</sup> The same is revealed by a comparison of modern French with Old French, or of the Latin of Caesar, Vergil and Ovid with its present-day descendant, modern Italian. These facts are really too self-evident to need pointing out. But though this evolutionary factor is obvious and generally recognised, there is frequently a tendency to assume that it is a thing of the past, and that, in all 'civilised countries' at least, language has now become more or less set and fixed, so that the English, the French or the German of today will be the English, the French or the German of two centuries hence, except that new words will be added to express new ideas and new inventions. This is far from the truth. Certainly there are agencies at work which will make change less easy than it has been in the past, but there are also others that will facilitate it; and that change is still going on, in pronunciation, in grammar and in the actual significance attached to words, anyone who has reached middle-age can prove from his own experience. Grammatical constructions which were looked upon as barbarisms and distinctly 'bad English' in his schooldays are now tolerated; words which

<sup>1</sup> For a specimen of Chaucer's English, see p. 60, and of Anglo-Saxon, p. 24.

twenty years ago were regarded as slang have now attained to respectability; a few 'reformed' spellings are creeping in, while partly from what might be termed 'natural causes', partly because of American influence exerted through the cinema and the television, and partly through the attempts of the B.B.C. to establish a 'correct standard' for its announcers, the pronunciation of a number of words is in process of modification. It seems reasonable to assume that the farther back in the history of language we go, the easier and more rapid was the process of change, for those forces making for conservatism were less active. When men lived in small, isolated communities, often leading a wandering life, when they felt no necessity for recording what they said or thought, there was probably more fluidity about their speech than at a later age. So it happens that the greatest and perhaps some of the most important developments in the history of language took place at a period when the documentary evidence from which they might be studied is practically non-existent.

In the third place it should be realised that speech or language is the distinguishing characteristic of man as such and is one of the chief attributes which differentiate him from the other animal species. Every tribe or race of human beings speaks a language of some kind. The lower animals merely make characteristic noises, some of them just spontaneous and apparently meaningless, others expressive, in a rather crude way, of instincts such as fear, anger, sex, joy, etc. Yet Professor Lloyd James assures us<sup>1</sup> that many animals have all the necessary speech organs, at least in embryo and that had they shown any aptitude to use them in the same way that primitive man did, they would probably have developed in a similar direction. So

<sup>1</sup> *Our Spoken Language* (Nelson Discussion Books, No. 9, 1938 ).

the question arises, why was it the one particular species which today we have come to call the human that passed from the utterance of mere instinctive noises to something which we may style primitive speech? The answer is probably to be found in the development of mind. The species which developed mind and personality also developed speech. Which gave the impetus to the other it is all but impossible to say. Possibly they were complementary, exerting a mutual influence; but be this as it may, Sir G. Elliot Smith was almost certainly correct when he maintained that the discovery of speech marked the beginning of man.

What precisely was the origin of this faculty is still a matter of dispute, and many learned treatises have been written on the subject without any great measure of agreement being reached. At present four chief theories hold the field. They are as follows:

(a) *The bow-wow theory.* This holds that the earliest speech was produced by man's attempting to imitate some characteristic sound of the creature or the object to which he was referring. By way of illustration the exponents of this theory point out that, if left to itself, the young child adopts a similar method of expression, and that in all probability, as in so many other of his habits, he is only reproducing the behaviour of his adult ancestors many thousands of years ago. For him the thing that distinguishes a dog from any of the other animals he sees is its bark. It is the animal that says 'bow-wow', and so very soon he begins to call it a bow-wow. In this imitative tendency, some theorists would have us believe, is to be found the beginnings of language; and certainly some words whose roots seem to go back to very ancient times would support such an assumption. In a word like *snake*, for instance

(which has a cognate form in many languages), we can hear the hissing sound; in *wind* there is an imitation of the whistling of the gust among the tree-tops, while in nearly every one of the ancient European languages the word for *water* has a liquid sound in it. These are only three examples, but others could be found; and it is a recognised fact that in many words of more recent coinage, especially those which denote sounds of one kind or another (e.g. *puff*, *whine*, *wail*, *whistle*, *babble*) the onomatopœic element has played a conspicuous part.

(b) *The ding-dong theory.* The second theory, nicknamed the ding-dong theory, is usually associated with the name of the eminent German scholar and philologist, Max Muller, though others have also adopted it.<sup>1</sup> This theory holds that the beginnings of language are to be found in the sense of rhythm which seems to have been innate in man from a very primitive stage of his existence and by which he is related to the rest of the universe, which is essentially rhythmical. Again the theory falls back on the tendency to imitation, but the imitation of movement rather than of sound. Observing a certain rhythm in the purling of the stream or the swaying of the trees in the wind, early man 'ding-donged' phonetically to them, partly as accompaniment, partly in imitation; and so, as Bücher puts it, a primitive speech gradually developed which became, in its first stages, a simple rhythmical hum or chant, keeping time with the step in walking or the hand in work. This theory would thus connect the origins of speech with the same impulse which, at later dates, gave rise to the savage war-dance, the medieval ballads and the sea-chanties. Perhaps there is also some connexion with the habit of whistling as an accompaniment to manual processes.

<sup>1</sup> Notably Max Muller's fellow-countryman, Bücher.

(c) *The pooh-pooh theory.* Then there is the theory which traces all forms of speech utterance back to emotional interjections evoked by pain, surprise, pleasure, wonder, etc., or to anticipations of them, and would have us believe that our more rational language is a refinement upon these cries which were not, at first, very far removed from the brute noises. This has become known as the 'pooh-pooh' theory, since the expression 'pooh-pooh', as employed in the phrase *to pooh-pooh a scheme*, is the best present-day illustration of the principle. At first *pooh-pooh* is just an exclamation implying contempt or disgust. Through being frequently used with this implication it acquires a meaning; then from this root is formed the verb *to pooh-pooh*, which takes a definite place in the spoken, if not in the literary, language. This principle, one school of theorists would contend, underlies the origin of all language.

(d) *The gesture theory.* And finally there is the theory, advanced by Wilhelm Wundt and later re-stated by Sir Richard Paget in his book *Human Speech*, which we may call the 'gesture' theory. The earliest method of communication, maintains Wundt, was by sign and gesture made with the hands. Such a 'language' was natural and spontaneous, and we even resort to it today when we beckon to a person to let him know that we wish him to come towards us, or when we try to speak by gesture to someone whose language we do not understand. Now, points out our theorist, every gesture of the hand is accompanied by a corresponding movement of the tongue, the lips or the jaws, and in the course of time the hand-gesture came to be displaced by the corresponding tongue-, lip-, or jaw-gesture, and so man passed from sign-language to spoken language. For instance, when one lifts the arm to point upwards, the tongue also rises so that the tip of it points



towards the top palate. In this position it readily produces the sound *al*, and as it happens this syllable is a basic one, in a number of ancient languages, in words expressing the idea of *up* or of *height*. In his *Education, Its Data and First Principles*, Sir Percy Nunn develops the same theory, giving as examples the words *I* and *me*, in which the lips are drawn in towards the speaker in the same way that he would point to himself with his finger, and *you* or *thou*, in which the movement is towards the person addressed. The same directional difference is observable between the words *here* and *there*; and it is perhaps not without significance that when we get animated in our speech, feeling that the spoken word is not forceful or emphatic enough, we fall back upon hand gesture to supplement the efforts of our tongue.

These, then, are the four chief theories concerning the origin of human speech. There is something to be said for them all, but none in itself seems really satisfactory.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the truth is that each is correct up to a point, but only up to a point; that all the factors suggested, and a number of others, were operative, and that speech was the result of a combination of processes rather than of any particular process. It is improbable that the question will ever be solved; and in any case it is a problem for the anthropologist and possibly the psychologist rather than for those whose researches lie in the fields of language and philology.

<sup>1</sup> Dr Wilbur M. Urban (*Language and Reality*, 1939) dismisses the first three theories as having little to support them, and contends that 'even when combined they do not explain everything .... Such theories assume that single words are the units of communication and develop in isolation, whereas it is probable that sentences and larger unities came first, and that words are the result of analysis, helped by written language.' (*Op. cit.*, p 75.)

## CHAPTER II

### THE DESCENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

At some time in our youth we must all have wondered why there were so many languages in the world and have felt that it would be much more sensible if everybody spoke the same tongue; then there would be no need for us to learn foreign languages before we could make ourselves understood to a person from another country. And since the idea that a person is a foreigner and therefore different from ourselves rests very largely upon the fact that his speech is unfamiliar, and in the ears of the uninitiated seems just a jumble of unintelligible sounds, a universal language, it has often been felt, would go far towards establishing and cementing friendship and understanding between the peoples of the earth. So from time to time there have been attempts to devise some kind of international language. The best-known, of course, is Esperanto, though it is by no means the only one. Many people, no doubt, when they speak of the desirability of a universal language envisage their own as the obvious one to attain to world-wide currency.

This problem of the diversity of tongues has exercised the minds of men from early times. The author of the Book of Genesis offered a solution in the story of the tower of Babel in which it was suggested that many tribes which at the date when the book was written (about 600 B.C.) spoke different languages had, much earlier in their history, spoken the same, but that, for a purpose of his own, God

confused their tongues. This story, of course, is merely a myth or fable, on a par with the stories of the Creation and the Flood, told in the same book; but by a curious coincidence the explanation does happen to have a grain of truth in it, in so far as modern linguistic research has shown that languages can, in fact, be grouped in families, and that many which now appear widely divergent in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, etc., are traceable to a common ancestor in remote times. Several different families of languages are known to philologists,<sup>1</sup> but the only one that concerns us here is that which includes most of the European tongues and also some of those of Asia. Even a superficial acquaintance with German and Dutch will convince us that they are closely related to English; but it is not so easy, at first sight, to see much connexion between German and French or Italian, and still less between any of these and some of the languages of India. Yet scholars have shown beyond dispute that they are all members of the same family and go back to a common origin.

This parent language has been variously named Aryan, Indo-Germanic and Indo-European. The first has been abandoned for some time and is now applied rather to a later sub-division of the parent tongue, which gave rise to Sanskrit and the Indian group of languages, as well as Persian. In any case, since the recent appropriation of the term by Hitler and the National Socialist philosophy it is apt to be misleading. Indo-Germanic, though favoured by a number of present-day philologists, is also open to objec-

<sup>1</sup> No definite connexion between the various families or 'language-groups' has been traced, a fact which suggests that the faculty of speech arose and developed spontaneously and independently in several different parts of the earth, though not, of course, necessarily at the same period.

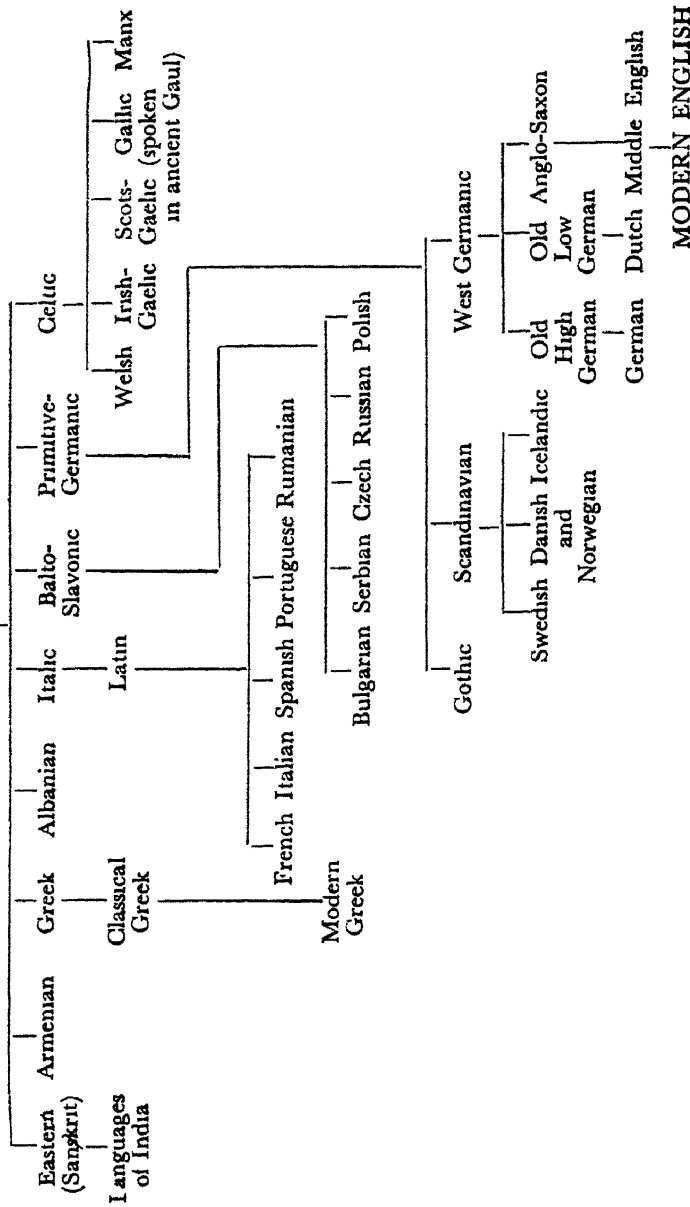
tion in that the second element, by stressing its lineal connexion with the Germanic tongues, such as English, Dutch, German, Danish, etc., fails to give prominence to its relationship with the Romance and Slavonic groups. So the best designation would seem to be Indo-European.

It is generally agreed that it was spoken about 3000–3500 years B.C. by nomadic tribes which wandered in the lands around the Black Sea,<sup>1</sup> and even went so far afield as the Steppes of Siberia. These tribes split up into various sections, which moved in different directions across the continent of Euro-Asia. Each section would, of course, take the parent language with it, and becoming isolated from the others would develop it along its own lines, so that in the course of years several different dialects of the one original language arose. But besides this, each group would be constantly adding to the language in its own way. As a result of this two-fold process, by 2000 B.C. or a little later, it is believed, the original Indo-European had split up into eight distinct language-groups or dialects. In course of time each of these also sub-divided, and this process, repeated down the ages, but modified to some extent by later contacts between group and group, has given us the multiplicity of languages which exists today. The diagram on the next page will make clear the main lines of development.

Of Indo-European we have no direct, first-hand knowledge. Its vocabulary was probably limited, but there is nothing to warrant the assumption that it was a simple language. On the contrary, the evidence is rather in the other direction. Simplicity and directness of expression are products of the higher planes of intelligence and civilization,

<sup>1</sup> Though the regions now occupied by Lithuania and Hungary have also both been suggested for their home.

# INDO-EUROPEAN



## THE INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY OF LANGUAGES.

Sketch to show the descent of Modern English and its relation to the other members of the family

that is why, as a language develops, there is always observable a tendency to reduce, or even to eliminate altogether, inflexions. Most ancient languages are far more complex and complicated than their descendants of the present day. Amongst contemporary tongues one of the most intricate is that spoken by the Aborigines of Australia; and it is a matter of common observation that an ill-educated person, or one of sub-normal intelligence, expresses himself much less concisely and simply than does one whose education and intelligence are above the average. It has even been conjectured that Indo-European had two different words for *your head* and *my head*, for to the speaker they were two distinct and different things. It was only later, when the analytical tendency began to show itself, that men realised that there was a certain resemblance; that it was only the ownership of the head that differed, and that therefore it would be more accurate to use an expression which showed both the difference and the likeness—*my head*, *your head*.

There are still traces of the parent Indo-European to be found embedded in the various languages that were derived from it, in much the same way that fossils are embedded in rocks. \* It is a noticeable fact, for instance, that in most of the modern European languages and in the older tongues from which they were derived, the personal pronouns, in the singular at least, bear a very close resemblance. So also, if due allowance is made for the sound-changes described on pages 17–18, do the equivalents of the modern English verb *to have* and the words for the commoner family relationships, such as *father*, *mother*, *brother*, etc., though there is not the same correspondence in the case of the more distant relationships, like *aunt*, *uncle*, *cousin*, etc. Evidently by the time that the dispersal of the ancient Indo-European tribes took place they had not come to recognise any relationship

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outside that of the immediate family, and consequently had no words to express them. But even more interesting is the close resemblance in the ancient languages, and, of course, in the modern ones that have developed from them, of the cardinal numbers up to ten. The following table will show this. Obviously, from considerations of space, only a limited number of representative languages can be taken but the reader can, if he feels so inclined and if he is competent to do so, fill in others, and he will find that the same principle holds good. For instance, the names of the same numbers in French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese closely resemble the Latin and are clearly derived from them.

English	Anglo-Saxon	Gothic	German	Dutch	Danish	Latin	Greek (English Literals)
one	ān	ains	eins	een	een	unus	eis (en)
two	twā (Masc. twēgen)	twāi	zwei	twee	to	duo	duo
three	ðri <sup>1</sup>	ðrija <sup>1</sup>	drei	drie	tre	tres	treis
four	fēower	fidwōr	vier	vier	fire	quattuor	tessara
five	fif	fimf	fünf	vijf	fem	quinque	penite
six	siex	saihs	sechs	zes	sex	sex	hex
seven	seofon	sibun	sieben	zeven	syv	septem	hepta
eight	eahta	ahtau	acht	acht	otte	octo	okto
nine	nigon	niun	neun	negen	ni	novem	ennea
ten	tien	taihun	zehn	tien	ti	decem	deka

When we get above ten the resemblance no longer holds throughout, though it does within individual groups. What is the explanation? Apparently that early man counted on

<sup>1</sup> The symbol ð was used in Anglo-Saxon and Gothic to denote the sound of the Modern English *th*.

his fingers, and consequently was unable to go above ten. At the time of the dispersal the Indo-Europeans, as we may call them, had only arrived at this stage. The system of enumeration above what could be counted on the fingers of the two hands was a later invention of the separate groups, each of which adopted its own nomenclature. Moreover, as Dr. Henry Bett points out in his *Wanderings Among Words* (1936), 'Five is the same word as *hand* in the speech of Labrador at one end of the world and of Siam at the other', and remarkable as this may appear at first sight, when we come to think about it, it is not to be wondered at. Enumeration up to five completed one 'hand' or group; and it is not without significance that in the Roman system of representing numerals the first distinctive sign after the *i* is the *v* for five.

For long, no doubt, simple counting was done with the aid of the fingers; amongst uneducated folk and small children it still is. But it would seem that for more complicated reckoning resort was had to pebbles for counters. The Latin word for a pebble is *calculus*: hence our verb *to calculate*; and it is one of the ironies of language that the term originally associated with the most elementary kind of arithmetic has now come to denote one of the higher and more complex processes of mathematics.

From the point of view of the study of English, the most important of the eight language-groups mentioned above is that which has come to be known as Primitive Germanic (or sometimes Teutonic), since it was from this branch of the Indo-European family that the Germanic languages, of which our own is one, took their descent. It was spoken over the bigger part of central and northern Europe from about 2000 to 1000 B.C. Throughout this period, of course, it was in a constant state of flux. Many modifications were



taking place, and just as it had originated as a dialect of Indo-European, so it was itself breaking up into several different dialects; mainly on a geographical basis, as we shall see later. Into all the changes we cannot enter. In any case, a treatise on them, however elementary, would be meaningless to anyone who was not already versed to some extent in the principles of philology. But to one very important change reference must be made. We may call it the Primitive Germanic Consonant Shift, and the explanation of it, put as simply as possible, is as follows:

The branch of Indo-European next in importance to Primitive Germanic was Italic, the chief descendant of which was Latin and, through this, modern French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Rumanian (for this last is a Romance language, despite the fact that geographically Rumania is situated amongst a Slavonic group of peoples). Now a great German scholar of the nineteenth century, Jacob Grimm, noticed that if a number of Latin words are placed alongside their equivalents in the Germanic languages, so that they can easily be compared, it almost invariably happens that where there is a *p* in Latin the corresponding Germanic word has an *f*; where there is *t* in Latin, the corresponding Germanic word has a *ð* the (*th* sound); where there is a *d* in Latin, in the corresponding Germanic root there is a *t*, etc., etc. So after a good deal of investigation he concluded that while the Italic group of languages had kept the Indo-European consonant system almost intact, the Primitive Germanic group had changed it, and the change had apparently proceeded so regularly that it must have followed some definite, methodical course. As a result of further research he formulated a law which he declared underlay the change, and this law has become known to students of language as *Grimm's Law*. Actually it was not

quite accurate; or rather it was accurate as far as it went, but it did not account for all the changes in question. This deficiency was later made up by *Verner's Law*, named after the Danish philologist who formulated it.

In an elementary treatise such as this, there is no point in attempting to distinguish between the results of the researches of the two scholars. Suffice it to say that the following are the most important sound-changes that appear to have taken place in Primitive Germanic.<sup>1</sup> The symbols used have a phonetic rather than an orthographic value, though usually the two correspond, and in most cases a Latin word is taken as showing the original consonant sound inherited from Indo-European. The first symbol represents the original, the second the Primitive Germanic development of it.

p > f	Lat. <i>pes, pedem</i> ;	A.S. <i>fōt</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>foot</i>
	Lat. <i>piscis</i> ;	A.S. <i>fisc</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>fish</i>
	Lat. <i>pater</i> ;	A.S. <i>faðer</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>father</i>
t > ð. <sup>2</sup>	Lat. <i>tres</i> ;	A.S. <i>ðrī</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>three</i>
	Lat. <i>tu</i> ;	A.S. <i>ðu</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>thou</i>
	Lat. <i>frater</i> ;	A.S. <i>broðor</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>brother</i>
k > h.	Lat. <i>canis</i> ;	A.S. <i>hund</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>hound</i>
	Lat. <i>cor</i> ;	A.S. <i>heorte</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>heart</i>
	Lat. <i>caput</i> ;	A.S. <i>hēafod</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>head</i>
kw > hw.	Lat. <i>quis</i> ;	A.S. <i>hwā</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>who</i>
	Lat. <i>aqua</i> ;	{ A.S. <i>waeter</i> ; Gothic, <i>a a</i> ; <sup>3</sup> Mod. Eng. <i>water</i>	

<sup>1</sup> It must not be supposed that all the changes tabulated took place uniformly and at the same time. They were probably the results of a gradual process, spread over many years, but they seem to have been complete by the end of the first century A.D.

<sup>2</sup> The *th* sound, as in *this*, *that*, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The Gothic symbol represented a sound like *hw*.

b > p.	Lat. <i>lubricus</i> (earlier <i>slubricus</i> = <i>slippery</i> )	A.S. <i>slūpan</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>slip</i>
d > t.	Lat. <i>decem</i> ;	A.S. <i>tien</i> ; (earlier <i>tihen</i> );	Mod. Eng. <i>ten</i>
	Lat. <i>dens</i> , <i>den-</i> <i>tem</i> ;	A.S. <i>tōð</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>tooth</i>
	Lat. <i>edere</i> ;	A.S. <i>ētan</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>eat</i>
g > k.	Lat. <i>genu</i> ;	A.S. <i>cnēo</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>knee</i>
	Lat. <i>ager</i> ; (= a field)	A.S. <i>aecer</i> ; (= a field)	Mod. Eng. <i>acre</i>
	Lat. <i>gens</i> ;	A.S. <i>cynn</i> ;	Mod. Eng. <i>kin</i>

As has been stated earlier, this is not the whole story; rather later in Primitive Germanic, for instance, there was a second but a lesser sound-shift, by which *b* became *v* and *s* became *z* in certain combinations; but to go into that here would only be to complicate matters unnecessarily.

Now the consonants with which we are concerned fall into three classes according to whether they are formed (*a*) with the lips, (*b*) with the help of the teeth, or (*c*) inside the mouth, including the throat. They are called *voiced* if the vocal cords are caused to vibrate in their production, *unvoiced* if they are not, and *nasal* if they are 'hummed' through the nose. They may be grouped thus:

	<i>Lips</i>	<i>Teeth</i>	<i>Internal</i>
<i>Voiced</i> :	b } stops	d } stops	g } stops
<i>Voiceless</i> :	p } stops	t } stops	k } stops
<i>Voiced</i> :	v } open	ð } open <sup>1</sup>	y } open
<i>Voiceless</i> :	f } open		h } open
<i>Nasal</i> :	m	n	ŋ (ng, as in <i>sing</i> .)

<sup>1</sup> As in *then* and *thank* respectively.

If reference is now made to the sound changes described on pages 17–18 it will be noticed that they took place *within the same group*, not from one group to another. They were, that is to say, the result of a slight alteration in the position of the lips or a tendency towards a use or disuse of the vocal cords, developments which are easily understandable; but a lip-consonant was never modified to a dental or internal or *vice versa*. These changes may appear fairly trivial in themselves, but the results of them have been far-reaching.

Primitive Germanic split ultimately into three important branches: Gothic, Scandinavian and West Germanic. Of Gothic we have records left in fragmentary translations of the Christian gospels by Bishop Ulfilas, who lived from 311 to A.D. 381. Scandinavian (Norse, as it is sometimes called) has given us modern Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic. The earliest records of it are runic inscriptions<sup>1</sup> dating from about the fourth century A.D. West Germanic, through which English is connected to its earlier ancestors, is a purely theoretical language. We have no written, documentary evidence of it, that is to say, but from a comparative study of certain later tongues (notably Anglo-Saxon, Dutch and German) philologists believe that these must have been derived from a third branch of Primitive Germanic, differing in certain respects from both Gothic and Scandinavian, and they have agreed on the term *West Germanic* as a designation for it. Again, of course, change was the rule. The most important modification that took place in this branch and not in the other two concerned the consonant-sound *z*, which, as we have noticed on page 18, had developed in late Primitive Germanic from an *s*. When

<sup>1</sup> Runes are the letters of the ancient Scandinavian alphabet, derived probably from the Greek system of literals and introduced into Northern Europe in the seventh century B.C. The word itself signifies *mystery*.

it occurred medially in a word it was now modified to an *r*, while at the end of a word the tendency was for it to disappear altogether. This explains why, in modern English, the plural of *was* is *were*, and that of *is*, *are*. It also accounts for the consonantal difference in such closely related words as *more* and *most*, and underlies the distinction between the comparative termination of adjectives in *er* and the superlative in *-est*. (See p. 32).

## CHAPTER III

### THE OLD ENGLISH (ANGLO-SAXON) PERIOD

HISTORIANS of the English language distinguish three main stages in its development. The first is the Old English (or the Anglo-Saxon) period, extending from about the year A.D. 600 to 1100. This is followed by the Middle English period, from 1100 to 1500, and finally there is the period of Modern English from 1500 onwards. It must not, of course, be imagined that in any of these years there was a complete and sudden change. that, for instance, the language of 1501 was very much different from that of two or three years earlier. A person living at that time would probably be quite unaware of any difference at all over so short a period. He might even have denied that much change had taken place during the whole of his lifetime. The fact is, as we have pointed out before, that the evolution of language is continuous; but there are periods when, from a variety of causes, the development is more rapid than at others. For the sake of convenience the historian of language, like the historian of literature, of political institutions or of social life, has to erect landmarks somewhere, and the dates chosen are not altogether arbitrary. By 600, for instance, the invading Angles and Saxons had succeeded in establishing their power fairly firmly and implanting their language in Britain, so this forms a suitable starting-point. In 1066 occurred an event which in the long run was to have a far-reaching effect upon the whole of English life—the Norman invasion and conquest. By 1100 the

Normans had consolidated their power, and their language was beginning to influence the native Saxon tongue, so there is very good reason for setting down the end of the eleventh century as the close of one chapter and the opening of another in the history of our English speech. And 1500 marks a similar turning-point, because by that date the full tide of the Renaissance had reached these shores, the Reformation was soon to alter the character of the English Church (though less radically at first than is commonly supposed), and the establishment of a Tudor dynasty on the throne after the battle of Bosworth Field had made England a 'nation' in a sense that it had never been before. All these things had their influence on the language. It will be seen, then, that there is good justification for selecting the years 600, 1100 and 1500 as the great landmarks in the development of our language.

As is generally known, the earliest inhabitants of these islands were the Britons, and their tongue was a form of Celtic. It had affinities with the language spoken in some districts of northern France, notably that part we now call Brittany, and probably was in general use throughout the whole Roman Occupation, from 55 B.C. to A.D. 410, though it must have become mixed with Latin elements from the speech of the Roman soldiery. The Britons came to regard the Romans not so much as conquerors, but rather as protectors. In fact, when, under stress of trouble at home, the legions were recalled, the tribal chiefs petitioned for their return, but their requests fell on deaf ears. Soon afterwards the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, tribes from North Germany, descended with their hordes, and the Celtic supremacy came rapidly to an end. Many of the Britons fled into the hills of Wales, Cornwall and Scotland, where their language was perpetuated, and henceforth the tongue

of the invaders became the tongue of Britain, or England as it now came to be called. Until recently it has been customary to name it Anglo-Saxon, but nowadays the more usual term is Old English, to be preferred because it stresses the essential continuity of our speech and the connexion of this early form of it with the language which we speak to-day. The chief objection that might be urged against it is that it is not so precise as the older term, since *Anglo-Saxon* calls up definite historical associations, whereas to the ordinary person 'Old English' is any kind of English which is archaic or has a flavour of antiquity about it—the English of Spenser, for instance (which, by the way, was an artificial affectation, and not the actual language of his day at all), and perhaps even the English of the Bible and the Prayer Book!

Whether we call it Old English or Anglo-Saxon, however (and it does not greatly matter which we use, provided we understand what the term means), we must not imagine that it was a single, homogeneous language. Even in modern times we have our dialects, and in the Anglo-Saxon period this was much more the case, for the comparative isolation of one part of the country from another tended to accentuate any differences that existed, so that a man from the North might well find that the language of the South was almost unintelligible to him. But of all the dialects that of Wessex (or the West-Saxon) became the most important; and this for two main reasons. In the first place Wessex was the most highly civilized of all the kingdoms, and the first that attained to any kind of political unity with a fairly ordered system of government; and secondly, most of the literature of the period was written in the dialect of Wessex. The main works which still survive either in part or in whole are the early epic poem *Beowulf*



(late ninth or early tenth century), a number of translations of religious works, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a historical record started by King Alfred the Great and kept up after his death, sporadically, until 1070. There are also a number of historical poems, riddles and charms, and one or two curious medical treatises. The following brief quotation from the Chronicle will serve to show how very far removed was Alfred's English from that of our own day.

893. Her on ðysum gære fōr se micla here, ðe wē gefyrn ymbe spræcon, eft of ðaem ēastrice westweard tō Bunnan, ond ðær wurdon gescipode, swā ðæt hīc āsettan him on aenne sið ofer mid horsum mid ealle; ond ðā comon ūp on Limene mūðan mid ccl hunde scipa. Se mūða is on eastweardre Cent aet ðaes miclan wuda eastende ðe wē Andred hātað.

[TRANSLATION: 893. In this year the great army, to which we have already referred, came again from the east kingdom, westward to Boulogne, and there embarked, making the crossing, together with their horses and all other things, in a single journey. And they came up to the mouth of the Limen with two hundred and fifty ships. The mouth is in the eastern part of Kent, and at the east end of the great forest which we call Andred ]

But though the English of today is descended mainly from the language of Wessex, traces of other dialects still remain, and not only in the varying pronunciations given to the same word in different parts of the country<sup>1</sup> or in local survivals in vocabulary. Their chief legacy to us is to be found in the existence of doublets, i.e. two words, at present slightly differentiated in meaning, but which origin-

<sup>1</sup> E.g. the difference between the Northern and Southern pronunciation of the vowel in *bath*, *laugh* etc., and also <sup>1</sup> at in *gun*, *sun*, *ton*, etc.

ally were dialectal variants of the same word. Examples are *whole* (in the Biblical sense of healthy or free from disease) and *hale*. The latter is still current (perhaps mainly through being preserved in the phrase *hale and hearty*), though the former is now obsolete, but both come from the Old English *hāl*, the one by the normal development of the Old English *ā* into *ō*, the other from a northern dialect in which this modification did not take place. Similarly there are the doublets *dent* and *dint*, both of which are still in use, and the word *raid* is merely another form of *road*, which we get with a cognate meaning in such a term as *inroad*. Possibly, too, the Kentish and Sussex word *trug*, the name for a shallow wooden basket used by gardeners for the collection of vegetables, is a variant of *trough*.

Anglo-Saxon had a very complicated grammar. There were two declensions of the adjective—strong and weak—and for its nouns, like modern German, it had the three-gender system, but fixed very arbitrarily, so that the word for *girl*, in the face of all logic and commonsense, was neuter, while of the two words for *woman* one was neuter and the other masculine! It was, too, a highly inflected language, though throughout the period a process of leveling-out took place, so that by A.D. 1000 some of the inflexions were tending to disappear and the way was being paved for considerable simplification in the Middle English period that was to follow. To take an example: there were originally a number of different declensions of the noun, but the most common was that in which the nominative and accusative plural ended in *-as* and the genitive singular in *-es*. As time went on many more nouns were made to conform to this type, and therein is to be found the reason why the vast majority of words in modern English form their plural by the addition of *s*, and why we make our

genitive with an apostrophe *s*. The plural and genitive endings, in fact, are all that remain in modern English nouns of the elaborate Anglo-Saxon system of inflexions, though in the case of the pronouns they have been more fully preserved.

Two other characteristics also we must notice as having a bearing upon the speech of the present day: what are known as *gradation* and *mutation*. The first of these, gradation, is the name given to that process, seen most clearly in the principal parts of verbs, by which vowel sounds undergo a change according to whether they occur in a stressed or an unstressed syllable. It is not peculiar to Anglo-Saxon, but goes back to the parent tongue, and can be seen also in Latin. A detailed explanation would be comprehensible only to an expert philologist, but the principle may be illustrated by taking the following example of the same sentence of four syllables, accented in three different ways

Cán he do it?

Can hé do it?

Can he dó it?

Say these aloud, one after the other, and it will be seen that the position of the stress makes a difference to the vowel that is pronounced in *can*. In the first it is definitely a short *ǣ* sound. In the second it approaches near to the *ū* in *gun*, while in the third it is scarcely pronounced at all as a separate sound. In the same way the addition of a suffix to the root of a verb in order to make a tense or a participle might well involve the shifting of an accent and so lead to a modification in the root syllable. Hence it happened that in many Anglo-Saxon verbs the present tense, the past tense and the past participle show a change, or a 'grading' in the vowel of the root syllable. As examples we may

take the verbs *drīfan* (to drive) and *rīdan* (to ride), which had the past tenses *drāf* and *rād*, and the past participles *drīfen* and *rīden* respectively, thus giving us our present-day forms *drove* and *rode*, *driven* and *ridden*. Similarly *writan* (to write) had the past tense *wrāt* and the past participle *writen* from which came our own forms *wrote* and *written*. Here, then, is a definite legacy which the Anglo-Saxons have bequeathed us. Far back in the history of the Indo-European group of languages a shifting of stress caused certain vowel-changes in some of the verbs, and these, inherited by our Anglo-Saxon ancestors, still persist in the language which we speak and write today.

A list of all the verbs in modern English which show gradation would be fairly extensive, but it would not include every one of those in which it appeared in Anglo-Saxon, for some, of course, have become obsolete, while others, for one reason or another, have come to dispense with it. A case in point is the verb *climban* (to climb), which had *clamb* and *clumben* as its past tense and past participle, though to-day it is a weak verb, forming both these parts by the addition of the syllable *-ed*<sup>1</sup>. Others which were once graded but now dispense with the gradation are the verbs *to help*, *to dive*, *to lock*, *to sulk*, *to flow*, *to chew*, *to yield*, *to yell*, *to melt*, and many more, though in the case of the last mentioned the old past participle survives in the adjective *molten*. In one respect all the graded verbs have taken a step towards simplification of a rather complex system. In Anglo-Saxon a large number of them had a different vowel in the past-

<sup>1</sup> Though Coleridge, it will be recalled, has the form *clomb* in *The Ancient Mariner*:

Till clomb above the eastern bar  
The hornèd moon, and one bright star  
Within the nether tip

tense-plural from that in the past-tense-singular. In modern English this distinction has disappeared, and the whole of the past tense is conjugated uniformly on the model of the singular.

Even more important from the point of view of present-day English is mutation (or *i*-mutation, as it should more strictly be called).<sup>1</sup> This took place in early Anglo-Saxon itself. Again, it was probably a slow process and did not occur uniformly and simultaneously in all words or in all parts of the country, but it is thought to have been well advanced by A.D. 600 and complete by 700.<sup>2</sup> As students of Latin will know, the word *mutation* merely means *change*; and the process in question is known as *i*-mutation because the change was caused by the influence of the vowel *i* (or sometimes *j*). The law can be formulated thus: *In early Anglo-Saxon, vowels in accented syllables were modified through the influence of an i or j in the next syllable, the i or the j subsequently disappearing.* The vowels affected were  $\bar{a}$ ,  $\bar{æ}$ ,  $\bar{o}$ ,  $\bar{u}$ ,  $\bar{ā}$ ,  $\bar{æ}$ ,  $\bar{ō}$ ,  $\bar{ū}$ ,  $\bar{ea}$ ,  $\bar{io}$ . They were, that is to say, all back vowels or diphthongs in which one of the elements was a back vowel. The front vowels *e* and *i* were unaffected.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There was also a *u*-mutation, less important than this, which is not dealt with here. Philologists sometimes call gradation *ablaut* and mutation *umlaut*.

<sup>2</sup> One of the chief reasons for assigning the completion of the process to the year 700 or a little earlier is that certain foreign words which were introduced about this date do not undergo mutation. If the process were still operative, of course one would expect it to affect foreign as well as native words.

<sup>3</sup> The back vowels are the sounds normally represented in writing by *a*, *o* and *u*, and the front vowels those represented by *e*, *i* and *y* (as pronounced in such words as *hurry* and *synonym*), so called because they are produced in the back and the front of the mouth respectively.

The following are the modifications that took place. It will be noticed that what in effect happened was that the back vowels were 'fronted'.

*Short Back Vowels  
and Diphthongs*

$\bar{a} > \bar{e}$

$\bar{x} > \bar{e}$

$\bar{o} > \bar{e}$

$\bar{u} > \bar{y}$

$\bar{ea} > \bar{ie}$

$\bar{eo} > \bar{ie}$

$\bar{io} > \bar{ie}$

*Long Back Vowels  
and Diphthongs*

$\bar{a} > \bar{x}$

$\bar{x} > \bar{e}$

$\bar{o} > \bar{e}$

$\bar{u} > \bar{y}$

$\bar{ea} > \bar{ie}$

$\bar{eo} > \bar{ie}$

$\bar{io} > \bar{ie}$

Later  $\bar{ie}$  (from  $\bar{ea}$ ,  $\bar{ea}$  or  $\bar{io}$ ) was simplified to  $\bar{i}$  or  $\bar{y}$ .

Now no doubt all this seems very complicated and very far removed from present-day English. A knowledge of these changes, one may feel, is all very well from the point of view of an antiquarian, but what living interest have they for a twentieth-century person? Actually they have a good deal. How many of us have wondered why the plural of *foot* should be *feet*, and not *foots*, or of *goose* *geese*, and not *gooses*? Why do we speak of a strong man, but a man's strength, not *strongth*? Why are there two different forms of the comparative and superlative degrees of the adjective *old*—*older* and *oldest*, beside *elder* and *eldest*? And which is the correct plural of *brother*, the modern *brothers* or the Biblical *brethren*? All these apparent anomalies, and many others, are explained by *i*-mutation.

The results of the process, as they are seen in the English of the present day, may be classified under five main heads:

(i) *Mutated plurals*. A number of nouns in early Old English formed their plurals by the addition of the inflexion

-iz (the predecessor of the modern plural in *s*). In certain combinations, obviously, *i*-mutation would become operative. The word *tǣð* (a tooth) may be taken by way of illustration. The earliest plural was *tǣðiz*, which, as a result of mutation, became *tǣð*; hence the modern plural *teeth*. Similarly *mūs* (a mouse) made the plural *mūsiz*, which ultimately became *mȳs*, giving the present-day *mice*. In the same way we can explain the mutated plurals *feet*, *geese*, *men*, etc. At one time this class of plural was much larger than it is now, many nouns having dropped their mutated plurals in the Middle English period and conformed to the growing tendency to add an *s* to the singular. Such a one is *bōc* (book). Its Old English plural was *bēc*, which by all rules of linguistic development should have given a modern *beck* or *beech*, but no such form exists. The word *brother*, on the other hand, has distinguished itself not only by acquiring two plurals but by contriving that one of them should be something of a freak. The Old English word was *brōðor* in both singular and plural; but it had a dative case (singular) *brēðer*. While it has formed one plural in modern English by the normal method (the addition of *s*) it appears to have made a second one from the dative by the addition of *-en* in Middle English, perhaps through a popular association of the mutated dative with a mutated plural.<sup>1</sup> So *brethren* is actually a double plural, and yet a false one. If the word had developed along strictly historical lines it would have had an uninflected plural, like *sheep*, *deer*, etc. Comparable, though not quite the same, is the now obsolete *kine* as the plural of *cow*. The Old English was *cū* (singular), *cȳ* (plural, by mutation), which should have given a modern *ky* or a similar word. But again a double plural has been made by treating *cȳ* as

<sup>1</sup> The suggestion of H. C. Wyld, in his *Short History of English* (1918)

singular and then adding an *-n*. The principle is seen at work again in the case of *children* (though here there is no mutation). The original *ċildru* (*ċ*=*ch*) would give us a plural *ċilder*. Once more, however, duplication has taken place by the addition of the *-en* suffix.

(ii) *Mutated abstract nouns derived from adjectives*. To form an abstract noun from an adjective the Anglo-Saxons added the termination *-iðu*, which later dropped the unaccented final *u* and became *-ið*. Thus the adjective from which we get the modern *long* was *lang*; the quality of 'long-ness' was expressed by *langiðu*, which, by *i*-mutation (see the table above, page 29) became *lengið*. So we get our present-day *length*. In the same way the difference between the vowels in *strong* and *strength* is to be explained. The adjective *hāl* gives on the one hand the modern *whole* (free from disease or injury) and on the other *hale*.<sup>1</sup> Freedom from illness was thus *hāliðu*, which, by the normal process of mutation, was modified to *hælið*, whence we derive our own *health*. The Old English word for 'dirty' was *fūl*; 'dirtiness', therefore, was *fūliðu*. This, becoming *fȳlið*, gives our modern *filth*, while the adjectival root becomes *foul*. Many other examples could be cited, but these few will suffice to illustrate the principle.

(iii) *Verbs derived, by mutation, from cognate nouns*. Certain verbal infinitives were formed by the Anglo-Saxons by the addition of the suffix *-jan* to a noun. *Dōm* was their normal word for *judgement*, and gives our modern *doom* (though with a change of meaning).<sup>2</sup> To make a judgement was

<sup>1</sup> See p. 25 for the relation of the two words.

<sup>2</sup> Though Scott used it in its original neutral sense in *Marmion*:

His doom contending neighbours sought,  
Content with equity unbought.

And, of course, it retains this sense in the term *doomsday*.



*dōmjan*; this, by *i*-mutation, became *dēman*, and so we get our verb *deem*. Similarly *brood* gives us the verb to *breed*, and *food* the verb to *feed*. The verb to *meet*, likewise, comes from an old noun *mōt* (meeting). It was used of the Saxon 'parliament', which was named the Witenagemot (literally 'the meeting of the wise men') and is preserved today in the term *moot-hall*, the description given to the old town-hall in some ancient cities. The noun *dole*, at one time almost obsolete but revived during the earlier part of the present century as a popular though misleading name for unemployment benefit, has produced the verb to *deal* (to divide or share out), though at a later date a new and unmutated verb to *dole out* was made, while from *gold* we get *gild*. In this last case another change has taken place, besides mutation. Reference to the table of changes given on page 29 will show that *o* was normally mutated to *e*; but at a later period an *e* became *i* when it occurred before *l*, *r*, *m* or *n*.

(iv) *Verbs derived from adjectives by mutation.* The termination *-jan* was also added to certain adjectives to make verbs. Thus *hāljan* (from *hāl*=whole) gave *hælan*, whence our verb to *heal*; *full* (adj.=full) gave *fulljan*, becoming *fyllan*, and so ultimately producing the modern *fill*.

(v) *Mutated comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives.* About the only remaining traces of these are the words *elder* and *eldest*, mentioned above as the comparative and superlative degrees of *old*, though even these are limited in their use. The early Anglo-Saxon suffixes for the two degrees in question were *-ira* (comparative), later becoming the modern *-er*, and *1st* (superlative), which developed into the present-day *-est*. Thus *ēald* (old) would naturally give us *elder* and *eldest* as the correct historical descendants of the Old English comparative and superlative, but alter-

natives have also been formed on the analogy of the positive degree, and of the two these latter are now the more generally employed. *Elder* and *eldest* are used only of persons, never of inanimate objects, and even then only in a restricted sense. We can speak of 'my eldest brother' (indeed in Standard English *oldest* would seem quite out of place in such a context) but we should never dream of referring to 'the eldest inhabitant'. Nor should we say, 'My brother is elder than I am', yet we could, and probably should say, 'He is the elder of the two'. In Old English mutation occurred in the comparison of a number of adjectives. Thus to be historically correct we should have to compare *strong*, *strenger*, *strengest*; *long*, *lenger*, *lengest*; *far*, *ferrer*, *ferrest*; *young*, *yenger*, *yengest*, etc. But in all cases, with the exception of the one noted at the beginning of this section, the mutated forms have been dropped and all three degrees made uniform on the basis of the positive.

An Anglo-Saxon dictionary contains about 20,000 words as compared with over 400,000 of modern English recorded by the Oxford Dictionary. By far the greater part of these were what might be described as 'native words', i.e. words which belonged to the vocabulary of the Angles and Saxons and had been brought with them from their German homes. But even at this early period signs of foreign elements and influences were visible, and Old English, at least as it was spoken about the year A.D. 1000, was by no means a hundred-per-cent pure language. Certain of its words it had inherited direct from the Indo-European parent tongue. The majority of these were words referring to the most elementary and obvious things, which would inevitably be noticed and named by even primitive tribes. We have already mentioned the words for the commoner family relationships and the cardinal

numbers from one to ten (pages 14–15), as well as the word for *man*. Into the same category fall the words for some of the more striking features of nature, such as day and night, the sun, the moon and the stars, the wind and thunder, earth, fire and water. The names of the commoner animals, too, such as the mouse, the cow, the goose, the wolf are of Indo-European origin, and quite understandably so, since most of them are creatures that would have an association with the daily life of nomadic tribes. The word *tree* (A S. *trēo*) goes back to the same source: but it was left to later peoples to distinguish different kinds of trees. To our Indo-European ancestors a tree was just a tree.<sup>1</sup> They could eat its fruit if it bore any that was edible, they could sit in its shade and they could use the wood it provided; and that they did use it is shewn by the fact that they handed on to the Anglo-Saxons, and through them to us, the words for timber, door, yoke, wheel and waggon. As might be expected, too, certain words connected with fighting were bequeathed to their descendants in various parts of the Continent. One of the most interesting is perhaps the Anglo-Saxon *hleō* (a shield), much used in both verse and prose. In its original sense it died out in early Middle English, but it still exists in our expression ‘the lee side of a ship’, i.e. the sheltered side. Or if one goes into the hop-growing districts of Kent, erected along the side of the hop-gardens there is frequently to be seen a kind of cloth screen, the object of which is to protect the hops against damage from the wind. Locally this is known

<sup>1</sup> The only tree name which, it has been suggested, goes back to Indo-European is the Anglo-Saxon *birce* (a birch tree), though what reason there was for distinguishing this particular type of tree from all the others that may have abounded in the original tribal home is not apparent.

as *lewing*. Sometimes a row of hops, planted very close together, serves the same purpose, when it is called a *lew-row*. Here, in the dialectal *lew*, we encounter once again the *hlēo* of Anglo-Saxon times.

The Indo-European tribes seem to have known little about agriculture and the tilling of the land save in its more elementary processes. It is true that the Anglo-Saxon verb *erian* (to plough) can be traced back to the parent tongue and has cognate forms in all the other Germanic languages, as well as in Greek, Latin and Welsh, while it appears as *ear* in Shakespeare's *King Richard the Second* and in the Authorised version of the Bible, but *māwan* (A.S.=to mow) has an ancestry no more remote than West Germanic. This was obviously the product of a more settled and regular mode of life than was known to the earlier peoples. And another rather remarkable fact is that while the Indo-Europeans have given us the words for *red* and *yellow*, they seem to have had no term to describe what to primitive folk must have been the commonest colour of all—green. Perhaps it was so common that it did not strike them in the same way as the red of the sunset or the yellow of the autumn leaves.

From the fact that the original language of Britain was Celtic, it might be expected that considerable Celtic elements would have become absorbed into Old English; but actually they are almost negligible, a fact which shows how complete was the rout of the native tribes by the invaders of the fifth and sixth centuries. The few survivals that did persist refer mainly to natural features of the landscape. The Old English *dūn* (a down or hill) was probably of Celtic origin, as were also *slōh* (a slough) and the predecessor of the syllable *-combe* (a small valley) in such place-names as Ilfracombe and Babbacombe. Perhaps *dun* (dark-

coloured) and *matto* (a mattock) were also derived from the Celtic, and a few more might be added, but the list would not extend very far.

Much more important is the Latin element. In his *Etymological Dictionary* Walter Skeat records one hundred and eight words in use in our language today which have come from Latin by way of Anglo-Saxon. Henry Bradley, writing rather later in *The Making of English*, states that in the Anglo-Saxon period itself about four hundred words of Latin origin are to be found in the language, or about two per cent. of the total vocabulary; but many of these were little used, while some belong exclusively to an earlier and some to a later period of the five hundred years represented by the term 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Old English'. The proportion of them in common use over the whole period was probably not large.

They may be classed under two heads: (a) those which were a legacy of the Roman occupation and having once been absorbed and accepted into the language had become anglicised, and (b) those which were the result of the introduction into England, in the sixth century, of Latin Christianity. The former class was probably fairly numerous at one time, but the majority of the words included in it suffered the same fate as the Celtic language with which they had become intermingled. Those which survived were of a practical, concrete character and were connected with the characteristic Roman contributions to the civilization of Britain. One was *mīl* (mile), from the Latin *mille passus* (literally a thousand paces). Then there was *wīn* (wine), from the Latin *vinum*.<sup>1</sup> Caesar's legionaries,

<sup>1</sup> For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with the language it may be pointed out that the Latin *v* was pronounced like the modern English *w*.

no doubt, had been very fond of their *vinum* at home in Italy, and their conversations about the good old times before they were sent overseas to so outlandish a spot must frequently have turned upon the superiority of their own Falernian or Cretican to the native mead or ale, which was about all they could procure in Britain, at least until, just before the legions were recalled to Rome, they started importing wine from the Continent. So the Roman word became accepted into the tongue of the Celtic races, was handed on to their Saxon successors (who, incidentally, had probably met it, and the liquor it denoted, in their German homes), and appeared in the Anglo-Saxon speech as *wīn*.

In the mind of the average person the Roman occupation of Britain is usually associated with the building of walls and roads, so it will come as no surprise to learn that the word *wall* itself (A.S. *weall*) is descended from the Latin *vallum*, and that *via* (a road) makes its appearance in the Old-English period as *weg*, giving us, by a normal process of development, our modern *way*. *Street*, likewise, comes from *via strata* (a paved way). When the Romans found a river which ran through the middle of what is now the county of Kent, the natural name for them to give to it was the *Media Via* (the Middle Way). Today we call it the Medway. On the Medway stands Maidstone, the county town of Kent. It has a long history, and if we turn to Domesday Book, we find it mentioned there as *Meddestane*, a name which would appear to mean 'the maid's stone,' though the precise significance of such a description is not at all clear.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I here take the opportunity of retracting the statement made in the first impression of this book that this was a fanciful piece of folk etymology. It is accepted by Eilert Ekwall in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, and to such authority one must defer.

Another innovation of the Romans was the system of trading by money payments instead of by barter. Words like *pecuniary*, *finance* and *financial*, though from Latin roots, were learned words introduced at a later date, and so do not concern us here; but the word *money* itself appears in Anglo-Saxon as *mynet*, an anglicised and mutated form of *moneta*. From it is derived the modern *mint*. But the most widespread traces of the Roman occupation are to be found in those place-names ending in *-chester* and *-caster*, which mark the sites of ancient Roman camps or military stations. *Castra*, the Latin word for 'camp', is found in the language of the Anglo-Saxons as *ceaster*. Normally in the dialects of Wessex, the South and the West of England, the *c* before a front vowel was pronounced like the modern *ch*,<sup>1</sup> but in certain districts of the North and North-East, owing partly to Danish influence, it was hardened to the *k* sound; hence the difference between Chester, Manchester, Winch<sup>h</sup>ester, Rochester, etc., on the one hand, and Doncaster, Tadcaster, Lancaster, etc., on the other.

The second class of Latin words to be found in Old English, namely those which were introduced from contact with Roman Christianity in the sixth century, when Pope Gregory sent his missionaries under Augustine to gain new converts for the Catholic Church, are mainly, as would be expected, of a religious character, and therefore, on account of their sacred associations, they retained a certain distinctiveness, never becoming a part of the common speech. From the Latin *monasterium* comes the Old English *mynster*, as in York and Beverley Minsters, though at a later date

<sup>1</sup> Though it remained guttural before a front vowel (i.e. it was pronounced with the *k* sound) where that vowel was due to *i*-mutation of an original back vowel, as in *cyming* (king), *cēne* (keen), *cēpan* (keep), etc.

the Latin word was re-borrowed direct as *monastery*; *monachus* gives us *munuc* (a monk), *episcopus* becomes *biscop* (a bishop), while *præost* (a priest) comes from *presbyter*, which Latin in its turn had borrowed from Greek. The Catholic office of the Mass, from the Latin *missa*, a past participle of the verb *mittere* (to send), appears in Old English as *maesse*, and from this is derived not only the present word for that office, but also the final syllable in such words as *Christmas*, *Michaelmas*, etc. Incidentally it may be noticed that a few native words which had been connected with the old pagan religion took on a new significance with the coming of Christianity, for, very wisely, the missionaries sought as far as possible to build upon native tradition and to turn it into new channels rather than to uproot it. One such word was *hūsl*, which occurs quite frequently in early English religious writings in the sense of sacrament or Eucharist. Previously it had been the word for *sacrifice*. Even one of the most sacred of all the Christian festivals, that of Easter, took its name from an old pagan feast held to celebrate the resurrection of nature with the coming of spring. Nor is it without significance that the 'holy day' of the week, specially set aside by the Christian church as a day of rest and worship, is named after the sun, which played a central part in much Druidic ritual.

When we come to the Norse or Danish element in Old English we are in an altogether wider field, and one of considerable importance from the point of view of the future development of the language. The incursions of the Danes started towards the end of the eighth century, when bands of Norse marauders attacked and plundered the east coast and finally established a few settlements there. A hundred years later, as the result of more sporadic attacks, these settlements became more numerous and



were not confined solely to the east-coast districts; the invaders penetrated a good way inland and began to harry the southern as well as the more northerly parts of England. Alfred, it will be remembered, put up a brave and determined struggle against them, and finally, by the Treaty of Wedmore in 878, an agreement was reached by which the Danes were permitted to settle in that part of England on the north of a line drawn from London to Chester, following roughly the old Roman road of Watling Street (an area which became known as the Danelaw), while the territory south of this line was left under Saxon jurisdiction. It is important to bear this division in mind, for though it was of a purely political character, it was destined to have its effect on the development of the language in the two parts of the country. Later, of course, other marauding Danes and Norsemen came, and the climax was reached when, in 1017 to 1035, a Danish king sat on the English throne in the person of Canute.

The influence of these events upon the language of the Anglo-Saxons manifests itself in three directions: viz. (a) in certain place-names in the territories settled by the Norsemen, (b) in the introduction of new words of Danish or Norse origin, and (c) in a modification (sometimes of grammar and syntax, but more often in the pronunciation) of the existing language. Again we cannot go into great detail, for much of it is purely academic in interest. Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary* gives about five hundred words still in use today which are either of Norse origin or show Norse influence; a more recent investigation reveals nearly double that number, and it stands to reason that those which have survived are only a comparatively small proportion of what once existed, so it will be realised that the Danish influence was fairly widespread and went deep.

The best way to deal with it in a small study such as this is probably to take a few representative words from each class which, in one way or another, have a contemporary, living interest for us and leave the rest to the philologist or to the student who feels inclined to pursue this branch of the subject further.

First, then, for evidence of the Danish influence in place-names. This is to be found mainly in the terminations *-by*, *-toft*, *-thwaite* and *-thorpe*, all to be found more or less abundantly in the northern and eastern parts of England (i.e. in the territory which was assigned to the Danes by the Treaty of Wedmore and which they had settled previously), but rarely in the south and the south-west.<sup>1</sup> *By* is today the normal Danish word for 'a town' and is related to the English word *borough* and to the termination *bury* in such names as Canterbury. It is found in the place-names Whitby, Selby, Grimsby, etc., and is a sign that all these places were ancient Danish settlements. A Middle-English poem *Havelock the Dane* tells how Grimsby received its name. Grim, a Danish fisherman, was bribed by the usurping king to take the young prince Havelock and drown him in the sea. Instead he escaped with him to England and landed at a spot on the east coast, which was named Grimsby (literally Grim's town) to commemorate the event. This, of course, is only a fanciful legend, but the figures of Grim and Havelock are to be seen to this day upon the official seal of Grimsby. In Newcastle upon Tyne one of the principal streets is called the Bigg Market. This does not refer to its size, but means either the 'town'

<sup>1</sup> Dr. A. C. Baugh, in his *History of the English Language* (1935), claims to have found just over 1400 place-names of Scandinavian origin in England. Of these 600 are in *-by*, 300 in *-thorpe*, 300 in *-thwaite* and 100 in *-toft*.

or 'municipal' market-place or the street where the market for barley (Old Norse *bigg*) was held. And the term *by* occurs again in the word *by-law*, which is not, as some people seem to suppose, a lesser law, but a law made by the council or corporation of a town or city, as distinct from those which are made by parliament and apply to the entire country.

The syllable *-toft* (a holding) occurs in Lowestoft (probably 'Hlothwig's holding'), and *-thwaite* (a clearing) in Slaithwaite, Linthwaite, Satterthwaite and Gunthwaite. *Thorpe* is more frequent and widespread. Besides the surname Thorpe, there are Mablethorpe, Goldthorpe, Scunthorpe, Northorpe, Cleethorpes, and Thorpe, near Norwich. A small village near Barnsley in the West Riding of Yorkshire is called Thorpe Hesley, and it will be remembered that Tennyson's brook flowed by

Twenty thorps, a little town,  
And half a hundred bridges.

Students of German will not need to be told that this word *thorpe*, brought to England by the Danes, is cognate with the modern German *Dorf* (a village).

*Storr* and *Carr*, which both occur in place names in the north of England and also as personal names, are other examples of Norse words. The former is the modern Danish adjective for *great*, and in Old Norse signified a hill; the latter, from the Old Norse *kjarr*, was used to designate a wooded eminence.

Of the new words which the Danes brought with them and which were adopted into the English language a number, of course, have since fallen into disuse while others have been preserved only locally, as dialect terms. A native of Sheffield and its vicinity, for instance, who removes

from one house to another, will say that he is 'flitting', a term which to a Southerner, if it conveyed any meaning at all, would have rather a suspicious suggestion about it, denoting that he was departing without having paid the rent. But in Sheffield quite honest people flit. Actually the word is of Norse origin and is still used in Danish to-day with the same significance that it has in Sheffield—to move one's residence or place of business. No doubt the English adjective *fleet* (quick-moving) is a cognate word. *Gill* or *ghyll*, which would probably be little known had it not been popularised by Wordsworth, is the regular term in the Lake District for a steep ravine; and then there is also the Norfolk, Gloucestershire and Hertfordshire *mawther*, the local term for a girl, though it is possible that this may have developed from the Old English *māegð* (a maid). Readers of *David Copperfield* may recall that Mr. Peggotty referred to Mrs. Gummidge as 'the old mawther'.

So much for the dialectal remnants of the Danish invasions, though the list could be extended considerably. Many words which the Norsemen introduced, however, have become permanently embedded in the English language and are some of the most essential terms of our daily speech, without which we should find it difficult to express ourselves. Probably two of the most common and most frequently used verbs (if we omit *to be* and *to have*) are *get* and *take*, both of them introduced by the Danish settlers. The former, for which previously there was no precise equivalent, has today taken on a multiplicity of meanings and is one of the most over-worked words in the language, while the latter has completely displaced its Anglo-Saxon predecessor, *niman*, save possibly in certain dialectal uses. The same is true of the pronouns *they* and *them*, which after a struggle lasting well over two centuries,

finally drove out the native *hīe* and *him*, though it is worth noting that we still have a belated survival of the last-mentioned in the colloquial 'em of such a sentence as 'Give 'em to me'. In hasty speech an *h* very easily, indeed almost inevitably, gets dropped, especially if it is in an unstressed syllable, but that the *th* sound would suffer the same fate is most unlikely.

*Husband* (literally a house-dweller) is of Norse origin, and the modern *sister* comes not from the Old English *sweostor* but from the Norse *syster*. Even so essential a word, one would think, as *knife* only came into Anglo-Saxon via the Danes, *big* is more commonly used to express size than its Saxon equivalent *great*, while most of the names of the days of the week enshrine remnants of Norse mythology and folk-lore. Nautical terms, too, may be added to the list. One is the modern *haven*, which today probably seems to us thoroughly English, though it appears in the native Danish word for their capital—K benhavn (Copenhagen). Its literal meaning, in this case, is 'the merchants' harbour'. In modern English, of course, except so far as it occurs in place-names like Milford Haven, Newhaven, etc., it is only used metaphorically. Or perhaps some of us have wondered why a sea-captain is called a skipper, and what he has to do with skipping. The answer is, nothing at all. The Old-English word for *ship* was *scīp*, from which our own word is descended. The modern Danish word for the same vessel is *skib*, from an earlier *skip*, and it is from this that *skipper* is derived. The word merely means 'shipman'.

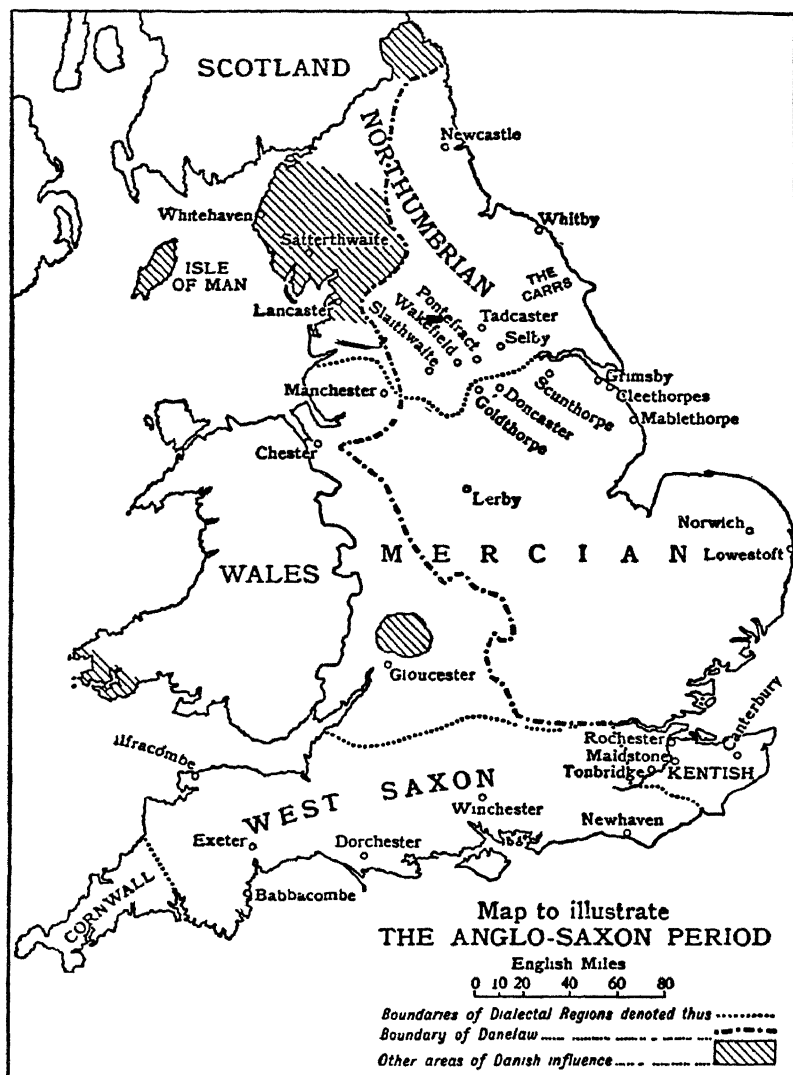
Finally there is the Norse influence upon the native tongue itself, mainly, as has been said before, in the direction of a modification of pronunciation. We have noticed already the northern hardening of the *c* in *ceaster* to make

the *-caster* of Doncaster, etc., as against the *chester* of the more purely Saxon part of the country. A comparable divergence is to be seen in the case of the *g*, which gives rise to the tendency, observable in present-day speech, for the Northerner to pronounce this sound hard in many words where the Southerner would pronounce it soft. Thus the surname *Gill* usually has the hard *g*, as in *get*, in the north of England, but the soft *g*, as in *gem*, in the south<sup>1</sup>. This 'hardening habit', as we may call it, is so deeply entrenched in the northern speech that in South Yorkshire (and possibly in other districts of the north of England, too), more often than not the word *gesture* is pronounced as though the first syllable were *guess*. The hard *g* in *give*, too, is due to the Danish influence; normally the Old-English *giefan* should have given us a *y* sound at the beginning. From the fact that Chaucer, writing in the latter part of the fourteenth century, actually uses the *y* form it is evident that in this respect the Danish conquest took a long time to complete. A small point of interest attaches to the word *dream*. In Old English it meant *joy*; its present meaning came in with the Norsemen.

But in spite of all these foreign influences; in spite too, of the much more extensive influence of Norman-French in the Middle-English period and of the classical tongues at the time of the Renaissance, to say nothing of the many other languages from which borrowings have been made, English, as it is spoken and written today, is still for the most part a Saxon tongue. In his *History of the English Language*, published towards the end of the last century, Professor O. F. Emerson analysed the vocabulary of a

<sup>1</sup> Though when the Northerner asks for a gill of milk (by which in many parts, incidentally, is meant not a gill at all, but a half-pint) he uses the soft *g*.

# OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE



MAP TO ILLUSTRATE THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

number of the great English writers with the object of finding out what percentage of their language was of native origin, and the following table gives the results of his investigations.

The Bible (Authorised Version)	—	—	94%	Pope	—	—	80%
Shakespeare	—	—	90%	Johnson	—	—	72%
Spenser	—	—	86%	Hume	—	—	73%
Milton	—	—	81%	Gibbon	—	—	70%
Addison	—	—	82%	Macaulay	—	—	75%
Swift	—	—	75%	Tennyson	—	—	88%

These figures may not be strictly accurate, since they are computed from a number of selected, representative passages, not from the entire body of the authors' works; and, moreover, it is reasonable to suppose the character of any author's language does not remain the same throughout the whole of his life; it changes according to the fashions of the age, his personal predilections and the nature of the subject upon which he is writing. But they are near enough for the purpose they are intended to serve. One is not surprised at the high percentage of native words in the Bible and Shakespeare; what is rather astonishing is that those authors whom we usually consider to have written under the influence of the classics—Addison, Johnson, Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay—show so predominantly Saxon a vocabulary. The present writer has carried out a similar experiment upon the work of four representative moderns, with substantially the same result: viz., Bernard Shaw 73 per cent., Galsworthy 75 per cent., T. S. Eliot 74 per cent., and Aldous Huxley 77 per cent. He then proceeded to analyse his own vocabulary as it appeared in personal correspondence, etc., of a non-academic cha-



racter, assuming that here would be found, as nearly as possible, the language of every-day speech as used by a normally educated person. Result, 82 per cent. native.<sup>1</sup> It should be borne in mind, of course, that all these statistics concern the active vocabulary (i.e. the words which a person actually uses either in speaking or writing); in every case, no doubt, the passive vocabulary (i.e. the words which one understands but does not habitually use) would contain a greater percentage of words of foreign origin. But it would probably still be true to say that the English language, despite all its borrowings and all the foreign influences that have been brought to bear on it, is predominantly Anglo-Saxon in character.

This being so, any exhaustive dissertation on the Anglo-Saxon influence on modern English would be absurd, since one would have to deal with about two-thirds or three-quarters of the entire vocabulary (i.e. about 250,000 words). It does, however, seem profitable from the point of view of the present day to dwell for a while upon two particular aspects: viz. (i) the general character of the Anglo-Saxon as compared with the foreign part of the language, and (ii) the gradual change of meaning which has marked the history of certain common Anglo-Saxon words, sometimes, though not always, due to the introduction of a foreign synonym, so that the way was opened up for a subtle differentiation of meaning. Generally it may be said that the Saxon words in our language come very near to our

<sup>1</sup> These figures are borne out by a similar analysis of modern writings made by Dr. J. Hubert Jagger and mentioned in his *Modern English* (1925). His statistics range from 87·8 per cent. in an anthology of contemporary poetry to 65·4 per cent. in a treatise on law. In a book of the latter kind we should naturally expect a fairly high percentage of words of foreign derivation, especially French and Latin.

daily life and concern some of the most common and essential things of existence, as well as the most elementary occupations and the more obvious natural phenomena. As we have seen already, words for the closer family relationships—father, mother, brother, etc.—existed in Old English and have been handed down to the present day; and the names of most of our staple foods—bread, butter, milk, meat, etc.<sup>1</sup>—are of native origin, as are also the words *house* and *home*. Terms like these, which are all part of the vocabulary of the common folk and enshrine more or less sentimental associations, no amount of foreign competition could displace. They were too near to the core of native life. Our Saxon forefathers also gave us the names of most of the typical English trees and many of the more widely spread forms of vegetation. Of flowers they do not appear to have known a great variety, for a large number of those to be found today are either the result of deliberate culture or have been introduced from abroad. Fittingly enough, the rose, the national emblem of England, owes its name to the Anglo-Saxons,<sup>2</sup> though it must be admitted that the word had come to them from Latin; and the humble daisy commemorates a pretty piece of poetic fancy on the part of the countrymen of those remote times, for the Old English word by which it was known, *dægeseage*, meant ‘the day’s eye’.

The Saxons lived a fairly simple life. Fighting was not infrequent between the men of neighbouring tribes as well as against the Norse invaders; but they also had a rudimentary kind of civilization of their own and peaceful pursuits occupied a fair amount of their time. So they

<sup>1</sup> *Meat*, however, has since undergone specialisation. It originally meant merely *food*, as in the expression *meat and drink*.

<sup>2</sup> Though, of course, the Anglo-Saxons only knew of the wild rose.

gave to us the names of the simple kinds of weapons—sword, spear, bow, arrow, shield—and those of some of the basic implements and tools of such crafts as they knew. Their word for *tool* was *lōma* which today has taken on a specialised meaning in the word *loom*. As we have seen already, the commoner verbs and adjectives of modern English are derived principally from native sources, while such natural features as the sun, moon and stars, which played a larger part in the lives of early people than they do today, had all received their names long before King Alfred ruled in Wessex. The word for star (*steor*) is of particular interest, as it occurs in several compounds where its significance is today not at once apparent. The early mariners guided their ships at night by the help of the stars, so they formed a verb *steorjan* to express the action; hence, by way of the mutated form *stieran*, our verb *to steer*. And the side of the vessel from which the steering was done became known as the ‘steering side’, or the starboard.

The larger divisions of time such as day, night, week, month, year, fortnight are native in origin but the words for the smaller units—hour, minute and second—come from French. The Anglo-Saxons had, apparently, not learned to measure time out in divisions any smaller than that between the rising and the setting of the sun, though King Alfred is credited with the invention of an experimental time-candle about the year 887. Finally it may be noted that many of our stock alliterative phrases, like *might and main*, *fair or foul*, *kith and kin* (i.e. friends and relations) come from Old English, as do the commonest suffixes *-dom*, *-hood*, *-ing*, *-ness*, and *-ship*, and the prefixes *forth-* (in *forthwith*, *forthright*, etc.) and *with-* (*against*, as in such words as *withstand*).

But a number of words which have come to us from Anglo-Saxon have a different meaning now from that

which they bore for our predecessors of a thousand years ago. This question of the change of meaning in words is one of the most interesting and most enlightening sides of language-study and in a later chapter we shall have to go into it in greater detail. At present we may confine ourselves to a few examples to illustrate the different tendencies that have been at work in the evolution of the language from Saxon times to the present day. Our words *lord* and *lady* were originally *hlāford* and *hlāfdige* respectively. *Hlāf* was the ordinary Anglo-Saxon word for *bread* (it becomes our *loaf*) and *hlāford* meant 'bread-keeper,' while *hlāfdige* meant 'bread-kneader'. Here, then, are a pair of words which have been elevated in the social scale. Or take the surnames Smith and Wright, two of the commonest in the land. The former was, of course, originally an occupational name and is connected etymologically with the verb *to smite*, while a wright was a workman (cf. the old past tense *wrought* of the verb *to work*); so anyone bearing either of these surnames whatever social eminence he now occupies cannot disguise the fact that he is descended ultimately from humble stock which has risen in the world. A similar elevation is seen in the case of the word *steward*, which originally meant one who attended to pigs or cattle (the first syllable being no other than the modern *sty*), though the chief steward on one of our large liners might not care to be reminded of the fact; and perhaps the passengers would like it even less. As a final example of this class of word we may quote the Anglo-Saxon *tūn*, a hamlet or a small collection of houses. Towards the year 1000 it had come to signify a rather bigger collection, but with the coming of the Normans a new term—*village*—became available for this, and the native word was again elevated in status. It is, of course, our modern *town*.

So much for words which have risen in repute and respectability; others, however, have suffered the opposite fate. An example is *knave*, which at one time meant merely a boy or a youth and is retained in that sense in a pack of playing cards. In Middle English it was confined to a youth of the servant class (cf. Tennyson's archaic 'kitchen knave,' applied to the young Gareth), and, probably because servants were reputed to be dishonest and not over-scrupulous, gradually attained to its present unflattering connotation. As another instance we may take *fiend*. The Anglo-Saxon, *fēond*, from which it is derived, was connected with the verb *fēon* (to hate), and meant 'enemy' (cf. the present-day *foe*), but by stages it came to signify a devil, possibly because one tended to look upon one's enemy as the incarnation of all that was evil, possibly because the Devil, from the earliest Christian times, was represented as the enemy of the entire human race. And as a third example there is the adjective *silly*, which today means 'foolish' but in Anglo-Saxon times meant 'happy'. Coleridge's 'silly buckets on the deck' is a reminiscence of this older usage, which, of course, had become obsolete long before *The Ancient Mariner* was written. How precisely it changed its meaning is not clear. Possibly on the principle that ignorance is bliss.

A third class of change is due to what we may call 'association of ideas'. Take for instance the word *bead*, which today stands for a small globular object made of glass, amber or some such substance. In Old English it meant a prayer, but as, in the Catholic Church, the prayers were said by telling the beads of the rosary, the word became attached to these objects rather than to the idea of the prayer which they symbolised—a piece of linguistic evidence as to the danger inherent in the em-

ployment of symbolism and ritual. *Unkempt*, in the earlier stages of its history, meant 'un-combed', and could only refer to dishevelled hair; but since dishevelled hair gave one an untidy appearance it gradually took on the more general connotation of personal untidiness, from whatever cause it arose. And *uncouth* has undergone a similar metamorphosis. Originally signifying 'unknown', it gradually came to mean 'strange', and since what was strange was, to the popular mind, barbaric, the modern meaning arose. *Bridal* has developed from *brȳd-ēalu* (bride-ale), i.e. an ale-drinking to celebrate a marriage, while the adjective *giddy* has experienced some curious vicissitudes. The Anglo-Saxon *gydig* was derived, by mutation, from *god*, and meant 'possessed by a god'. The idea of a divine frenzy or religious fervour gave way to that of craziness, which in its turn yielded to that of 'light-headed'. So a person who produces a temporary lightness of head by whirling round is said to be giddy; but when we speak of leading a giddy life there is a kind of reversion to the original significance. As a final example of this class we may take a word which has undergone a change of meaning because of metaphorical associations. It is the verb *to thrill*—very familiar in these days of thrilling adventures, thrillers and thrilling films. In Old English there was a noun *ðȳrel*, which meant 'a hole'. To-day it no longer exists except in the compound *nostril* (literally nose-hole). So *thrill*, a derivative of this, meant to pierce or to make holes in something. Even in the early seventeenth century Shakespeare could talk of thrilling a person with a sword. Today this literal sense has completely disappeared and has been superseded by the metaphorical. We say we are thrilled when we are pierced through and through with excitement.

We may close this chapter with a note on two words of geographical interest. The ending *-shire*, found in the names of certain English counties, is cognate with the verb *to shear* (to clip or cut) and *to share* (to divide out). It was one of the divisions into which the kingdom was cut up. One of them was Yorkshire, which has three 'Ridings', and people must frequently have wondered what was the explanation of this curious word. Many, no doubt, have supposed it to be connected in some way with the verb *to ride*; but actually it comes from quite a different root. It was a *thriding*, or a third part<sup>1</sup> of the county. It is easy to see how, by a process of elision in hasty speech, West Thriding, East Thriding and North Thriding became West, East and North Riding respectively. Winifred Holtby, in defiance of the etymology of the word, added a fourth, the fictitious South Riding.

<sup>1</sup> For a similar construction cf. *ferthing* (a fourth part), perpetuated in the name of the smallest English coin, a farthing or the fourth part of a penny (now obsolete).

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

THE conquest of England in 1066 by William of Normandy was destined to have a profound influence not only upon the history and the political system of the country, but also upon the language. Up to this time English had been more or less a pure tongue with a sprinkling of Latin, Celtic and Danish words; but henceforth it became much more definitely a hybrid language. Having said this, however, we must correct two frequent misconceptions, otherwise we shall be liable to gain a distorted view of what really took place between the years 1066 and 1500, and more particularly in that part of the period which fell between 1066 and 1350.

In the first place we must realise that the English language had come into contact with the French, and had been affected by it, even before the Norman invasion. The influence had actually begun in the time of Aethelred, who, in 1002, had married a French princess. He had sent his son, who later became known as Edward the Confessor, to school in France, and when he returned to his own land he brought with him many French friends and courtiers. Thus a recent historian describes Edward, who reigned from 1042 to the early part of 1066, when he was succeeded for a few months only by Harold:

‘At least twenty-five years of his life had been spent continuously in Normandy. Norman speech was at least as familiar to him as English. All his friends and habits



were Norman. England knew nothing of him and he knew nothing either of English statesmen or English ways, and when he became king he wanted to surround himself with his Norman friends and raise them to posts of honour.'

It seems clear that a good deal of Norman-French<sup>1</sup> must have been spoken at the English Court from 1042 onwards. It could not, of course, have penetrated among the common people, and even the Saxon nobility despised and spurned it as a foreign tongue, but it is important to realise that it existed, and that William the Conqueror only hastened and completed a process which had already begun before he set foot upon these shores.

The second misconception which must be corrected concerns the relations between William and his new subjects. It used to be taught that the Conqueror was an oppressive ruler, who instituted something of a persecution of his Saxon vassals, virtually enslaved them, and in order to 'Normanise' the country as much as possible and to kill whatever nationalist feeling might still have existed, made an attempt to root out the English tongue so far as he could, thus anticipating the methods of some modern conquerors. But this is far from the truth. Actually he attempted to conciliate his new subjects. He had, of course, to curb the power of those elements amongst them which threatened the security of his rule, and several rebellions were severely

<sup>1</sup> Norman-French differed in certain respects from the language spoken in the other parts of France, for the Normans were originally 'Northmen' (i.e. Scandinavians) who had settled in North-West France in the ninth century, at the same time that others of their countrymen were harrying the shores of England. They had adopted the language of their new home but had modified it in much the same way that the Danish invaders had modified, in pronunciation and vocabulary, the native tongue of those districts of England in which they had established themselves.

put down and followed by the confiscation of lands; but there is no evidence to show that he attempted in any way to interfere with the language. Where Norman-French took the place previously occupied by English it was by a natural process. The common folk, and even the Saxon nobility (for they were by no means all despoiled), still continued to speak their native tongue, and it even appears that some of the more discerning of the King's officers also learned it in order to be able to converse with them.

Thus for some years there were two languages spoken side by side: English and Norman-French. The latter, naturally, enjoyed the greater prestige and the higher social status. It was the language of the Court, of the nobility, of the Law Courts, of the learned professions, for here the Norman influence was supreme; but ninety per cent. of the population still spoke English, or, more precisely, Anglo-Saxon, though modified in certain respects from that which was spoken and written by Alfred the Great. Gradually these two languages mingled to give what is known as Middle English, the mixed Anglo-French tongue from which our modern English is descended. The process was complete by about 1300, and it is significant that the resultant language was still predominantly a Saxon one, despite the vastly superior status that had attached to the Norman tongue for the past two centuries. In Chaucer's Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, written about 1386, it has been calculated that there are no more than twelve or thirteen per cent. of the words which are of French origin. The truth is that the Normans, though the ruling class, were a small minority, and what we have called 'the evolution of Middle English' was actually the increasing recognition by them of the native language.

which tended more and more to absorb words and elements from the Norman-French

The mingling of the two was, of course, a slow process which went on continuously and steadily and for which a number of reasons can be assigned, chief among them the natural and inevitable intercourse between the two sections of the community, and inter-marriage between them. A writer in the reign of Henry II (1154-1189) states that 'already the English and Normans, dwelling together and inter-marrying, are so mixed that among freemen at least it can scarcely be determined today who is English and who is of Norman birth.' And most authorities are agreed that by this time the greater part of the nobility could both speak and understand English, though they may not have used it much, at least amongst themselves. On the other hand their practice of sending to France for tutors to teach their sons French indicates that in England that language was rapidly losing its purity and able teachers of it could not easily be found on native soil, while the fact that Normandy was finally lost to England in 1204 meant that direct contact with the Continent was now severed and that the large English landowners no longer had, as it were, one foot in each of two countries. More and more, for the next century, they came to forget their Norman descent and to regard themselves as English. But custom dies hard, and where a language has been long established as the 'official' one it is difficult to bring about a change. So it was that, despite the growing tendencies in the country at large, French persisted for some while as the recognised language of the learned professions and of government.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Queen still signifies her assent to an Act of Parliament by the words *La Reyne le veult*

Gradually, however, a change came even here. In 1362 English replaced French as the language of the law courts, while in 1385 we learn from a contemporary writer that 'gentlemen have now much left for to teach their children French.' The same authority goes on to declare that there was an increasing tendency in the Grammar Schools to construe from Latin into English instead of into French, as had been the wont for the last two centuries. All these facts are indicative of the new trends.

Still, however, for several years French, or an anglicized form of it, continued to be regarded as a 'polite' language. Writing in 1300, Robert of Gloucester declared that 'except a man knows French men speak of him but little, but low men yet hold to English and to their own speech.' And it will be recalled that some few years later Chaucer tells us of the Prioress that

Frensch sche spak ful faire and fetysly,  
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,  
For Frensch of Parys was to hire unknowe.

Parisian French began to enter England towards the end of the fourteenth century, and more still in the early and mid-fifteenth, owing chiefly to a number of English translations of French literary works. But this does not fall within the scope of the present chapter, since the full effect of it did not become apparent until the beginning of the modern period.

One characteristic by which a student of Middle English will be struck is the variety of dialects, more numerous and more divergent even than those of Anglo-Saxon, though they were, of course, descended from these latter. If, for instance, we compare the language of Chaucer with that of such a work as the West Midland poem *Patience*, written

a few years previously, we shall at once notice the great difference between them; so much so that one might be forgiven for supposing that they were written in two distinct though related tongues, or that a considerable period of time separated one from the other. Here are the first few lines of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*:

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,  
 Ther was a duk that highte Theseus;  
 Of Athenes he was lord and governour,  
 And in his tyme swich a conquerour,  
 That gretter was ther non under the sonne.  
 Ful many a riche contre hadde he wōnne;  
 That with his wisdom and his chivalrie  
 He conquerede al the regne of Femenye.

And here is a brief extract from *Patience*, a poem which tells the story of Jonah.

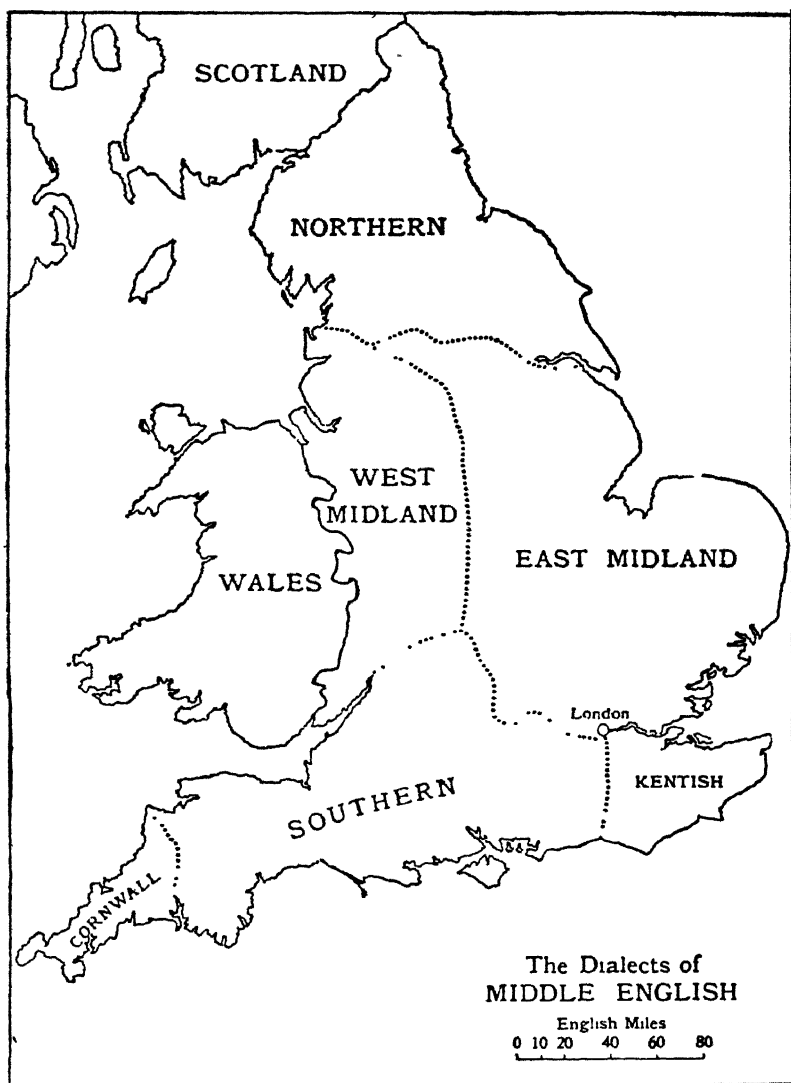
Hit bitydde sum-tyme in ðe termes of Jude,  
 Jonas joyned wats ðer-inne Jentyle prophete;  
 Goddes glam to hym glod ðat hym unglad made,  
 With a roghlych rurd rowned in his ere:  
 'Rys radly,' He says, ' & rayke forth euen,  
 Nym ðe way to Nynyue, wyth-outen oðer speche,  
 & in ðat cete my sages soghe alle aboute,  
 at, in ðat place at ðe poynt, I put in ði hert.

The Chaucer, clearly, is much nearer to modern English than is the *Patience*. Even a person ignorant of Middle English could make fair sense of the former, but with the latter it would not be so easy. And excerpts from works written in still other parts of the country could be placed alongside these, and we should find that they differed, in important respects, from both.

On the surface, then, it would look as if change and differentiation must have been more sweeping and more rapid during this period than ever it had been before. In this connexion, however, we have to bear two facts in mind. In the first place the supremacy of the West Saxon dialect for literary purposes in the Old English period must have had something of a levelling tendency, so that those writers who used any other dialect for their compositions showed an inclination to make it conform more nearly to the West Saxon standards in spelling, grammar and vocabulary than they would otherwise have done. We can, of course, only judge of these dialects on the written records of them that remain, and it is possible that in the Old English period those records suggest a greater degree of uniformity than was actually the case in the spoken language. Secondly we must bear in mind that from the middle of the eleventh century up to about the year 1200 (i.e. for about a century and a half) scarcely anything had been written in English; it had remained a spoken tongue only, with the result that all continuity of literary tradition had been lost. Then, after 1200, there came a wealth of written works of all types, and in the absence of any established 'standard', with a literary prestige behind it, each man wrote in the language of his own part of the country as it was then spoken; and as these had developed without the conservative, restraining power of any kind of literary tradition; as, moreover, they had developed in isolation, mainly amongst those classes of the community who had little contact with anyone outside their own district, it followed that there was considerable divergence between them.

But just as, in Anglo-Saxon times, the dialect of Wessex attained to the position of a kind of 'standard' so gradually

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one dialect came to occupy a similar position in Middle English, namely that of the East Midlands. There are several reasons for this. To begin with it was spoken in and around London, and as London became increasingly important as the centre of English life and affairs, so did the particular kind of speech that was prevalent there increase in importance. Oxford and Cambridge also used it; hence it became the language of scholarship. Chaucer and a number of the more prominent writers of his day employed it, thus establishing it as a literary dialect; and finally Caxton printed his earliest books in it, and so set a seal upon it as the 'English' language in a way that no other was. So by 1450 or thereabouts 'English' had become synonymous with 'East Midland', though almost all written documents showed traces also of the influence of other dialects. The transition was effected, as can be imagined, in a somewhat haphazard and chaotic manner, and for many years there appears to have been considerable doubt in the minds of writers as to what was the correct and accepted form of a number of words. One need go no further than Chaucer himself to realise this. In the first five lines of the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* we have the word *sweet* represented by two different spellings, *swete* and *swoote*; the usual present-participle ending is *-ing* or *-yng*, but occasionally we find the Northern *-and*, and the verb *to give* sometimes occurs as *yiven* and sometimes as *yeven*, though in neither form is there the hard *g* of modern English. It existed in some dialects, but it had yet to find its way into that of London and the Midlands.

In studying the evolution of our language during the Middle-English period, there are four different aspects which we have to consider, viz.,



- (i) Grammatical changes
- (ii) Changes in pronunciation
- (iii) Changes in spelling
- (iv) Changes in and additions to, the vocabulary.

In all of these, it must be realised, there was a double process at work. There was first of all the natural development which would inevitably have taken place independently of any external influences; and then there was the influence of the French element, which sometimes combined with these natural changes to strengthen and hasten them, but sometimes also arrested or diverted them. Let us take the four aspects in turn.

## (1) GRAMMAR

So far as grammatical changes are concerned we may say that they were generally in the direction of simplification. Thus there was a tendency, which had started in late Old English itself but which developed much more rapidly during the two hundred years that followed the Conquest, to level all the vowels of final, unaccented inflexional syllables under *e*. A greater degree of uniformity was thus achieved. In most dialects *-en* became a stock plural termination for the majority of nouns, no matter to what declension they had previously belonged, and even some mutated plurals were levelled under it. But the Midland dialects showed a predilection for *-es*, derived from that large class of Anglo-Saxon nouns which formed their plurals in *-as* (see p. 25), and as the East Midland speech gained the ascendancy this became the more usual form. No doubt the fact that *-es* was the plural termination for French words was also a contributory factor to the transition. Chaucer uses *-es* for the most part, though he still

has a fair number of plurals in *-en*, but as time went on they diminished, so that to-day the only real survival is *oxen*. *Children* and *brethren*, of course, are spurious plurals (see pp. 30-1), and the use of *chicken* as a plural in such a phrase as 'several chicken' is quite unwarrantable.

*En* (from the Old English *-an*) also became the regular ending for the infinitives of verbs in the early Middle-English period. Later it was preceded also by the preposition *to*, which was used in the first place strictly in the directional sense in such constructions as 'I go to fetch it', 'I have come to help you', etc., but then, coming to be regarded as an integral part of the infinitive itself, was extended to those constructions where there was no directional sense.<sup>1</sup> Since this now came to be looked upon as the sign of the infinitive, the termination was felt to be redundant and was finally dispensed with, first of all in the Southern districts, where it had disappeared by the early fourteenth century, and later in others. Turning again to Chaucer for evidence, we find that he uses all three forms, none of them by that date having, apparently, been definitely established as 'correct'. The more usual is that in *-en*: e.g. *to ryden out*, *to goon on pilgrimages*, *to seeken straunge strondes*, *to tellen yow*; but the form without the inflexion frequently occurs also. In such combinations as *to take our wey*, *the holy blisful martir for to seeke*, *to yeve penaunce*, it may be due to considerations of metre or of rhyme, though even so it shows that such a form did exist. But in *hym luste ryde soo*, *to drawe folk to heven*, *to countrefete cheere* these considerations do not enter in. Incidentally the last example suggests that, once again, the French influence may have been instrumental in hastening the loss of the termination, for French verbs, of

<sup>1</sup> This is the explanation of Otto Jespersen, in his *Modern English Grammar*, III, 10 (Heidelberg, 1931).

course, would not have the inflexion *-en* as a mark of the infinitive, though it was grafted on to some of them when they were adopted into English.<sup>1</sup> By Chaucer's day the infinitive without the prefixed *to* was almost obsolete, though one or two examples of its survival can be found in his works, e.g.

And after soper *playen* he began

It seems only to occur as a verbal noun, and, of course, as it still does today, when it is preceded by an auxiliary verb such as *may*, *shall*, etc

Another important characteristic of Middle-English grammar, which made for greater simplification of the language, was the reduction of inflexions. This is most noticeable in the nouns, where all distinction of case disappeared, with the exception of the genitive, which was indicated by the termination *-es*, the predecessor of our own *'s*,<sup>2</sup> while on the analogy of the French a new alternative possessive construction was developed with the preposition *of*. The indeclinable *the* (or *ðe*, as it continued to be written for some while) was introduced in place of the Old-English definite article, which was declined in all cases and all three genders, though traces of the older accusative (*ðone* or *ðene*) still remain in the phrase 'for the nonce' (for this once) and in such surnames as Noakes and Nash (at *ðen* okes, at *ðen* asche).<sup>3</sup> Chaucer, Gower and Wycliffe all use the undeclined form, which had become well established by the beginning of the fourteenth century, and by the end

<sup>1</sup> E.g. *The Prologue*, line 417:

Wel coude he *fortunen* the ascendent.

<sup>2</sup> Though Chaucer has examples of uninflected genitives in *his lady grace*, *oure lady veyl*, and *my fader soule*

<sup>3</sup> The dialectal *'tother* is likewise a survival from *ðæt oðer*.

of it was the only accepted one, at least for literary usage.

One other important development in Middle English we must also record: the substitution of natural for grammatical gender. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, in Old English there was no relation between the gender of a noun and the sex (or absence of sex) of the thing it represented; but by the middle of the twelfth century we find that in the language of the East Midlands gender had already become dependent purely upon meaning. Particularly valuable as affording evidence of this is a religious treatise in verse known as *The Ormulum*, and written just before the year 1200, which also has the undeclined *the* and adopts a rough kind of phonetic spelling to indicate pronunciation. In the southern parts of England the older system of genders was retained, with varying degrees of accuracy, until the early fourteenth century, but it gradually gave way before the more logical and simpler system. Three reasons are probably assignable for this development. First the fact that until about 1200, as we have said before, English had remained principally a spoken language without any very strong literary tradition. It is a matter of common knowledge that grammatical purity and accuracy is preserved chiefly in the written tongue. With a complicated gender system this is particularly the case. It is quite understandable that the ordinary folk who spoke English between 1066 and 1200 should find it difficult to master the intricacies of gender and should almost inevitably drift into a much more simple and intelligible system of their own, making everything of the male sex masculine, everything of the female sex feminine and all other things neuter, a practice which had become pretty well established by the time English became a written language once

more. The confusion must have been made worse—and here we come to the second reason—by the altogether different gender system of the French. The same object which was masculine in English might well be feminine in French, or *vice versa*; so once again the easiest way to cut the Gordian knot suggested itself in the system of natural gender. If native usage said masculine and French feminine, which was it to be? The most obvious answer was to let sex decide the question. And a third possible reason is to be found in the loss of inflexions in the adjectives. While the adjectives continued to be declined and inflected and were made to agree with the noun they qualified, gender was of some importance, and was shown by the form which the adjective took; but as the inflexions disappeared there was no longer anything to indicate a noun's gender, and consequently it became a matter of very little moment.

And while we are on the question of gender we may mention the introduction of the personal pronoun *she*, which first appeared in the middle of the twelfth century in the East-Midland dialect and subsequently spread to others. The corresponding Old-English word was *hēo*. Where *she* came from is still undecided, though much has been written upon the subject and many scholars have disputed over it. But whatever its origin, it has completely ousted the older word.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anything like a full treatise on the grammatical changes effected in Middle English would, of course, be very intricate and not easily intelligible to any but one who had at least a certain amount of specialised knowledge. It has been deemed sufficient here to indicate merely some of the chief trends and the broad lines of development. A more detailed study is to be found in H. C. Wyld's *Short History of English*, originally published in 1914 and reprinted in 1923.

## (ii) PRONUNCIATION

In dealing with the question of pronunciation we are on ground much less certain than we were with grammar; for grammatical changes and developments can be studied in written documents, but pronunciation relates solely to the spoken language, so that it is difficult to get such definite evidence as we should like on many things; and besides, in all probability there was considerable variation not only between district and district or generation and generation, but even between individuals. Nevertheless there are a few facts that can be stated with a fair degree of certainty.

From the point of view of present-day English the most important development that took place was that in the Midland and the Southern dialects the long *a* of Old English in such words as *hām*, *stān*, *hlāf* (pronounced with the same vowel as the modern *psalm*) became long *ō*. It was often represented orthographically by a double *o* (*hoom*, etc.), but was pronounced roughly the same as it is today in the words *home*, *stone* and *loaf*, which, of course, are the direct descendants of these Middle English forms. This change, which had already started in late Old English itself, appears to have been perfected by about 1250. The Northern dialects, however, preserved the original *a*, thus giving rise ultimately to a number of useful doublets by which our language is considerably the richer (see pp. 24-5), while Norman loan words like *dame*, *chant*, *fame*, etc., retained their native pronunciation and did not undergo rounding. In point of fact, an examination of Middle English metrical writings will show that in the case of the majority of words introduced from French, not only was the vowel sound retained but until fairly late in the period

the foreign accentuation was also preserved. The following few lines from the *Prologue*, with the French loan-words italicised and the accentuation marked, will serve as examples:

And bathed every veyne in swich *licóur*.  
 So priketh hem *natúre* in hir *coráges*,  
 Thanne longen folk to gon on *pilgrímáges*.  
 Of *aventúres* that whilom han bifalle.

At the same time we also find, interspersed amongst these, examples of French words which have lost their native accentuation and have been made to conform to the English pattern. Thus it seems that the transition was going on in Chaucer's own lifetime. Possibly those which were already *anglicized* were introduced earlier than those which were not; and we must bear in mind that where the accentuation was still uncertain the poet may deliberately have chosen the older form for the sake of metre. But in only a few words would this have been possible a hundred years later.

Another phonetic development which had commenced in the late Old English period and was completed in the Middle English was the lengthening of short vowels when they stood in open syllables, and the shortening of long ones in closed syllables,<sup>1</sup> so that we can say that by the end of the thirteenth century almost all vowels in open syllables were long, either because they had been so originally or because they had been lengthened, while almost all vowels in closed syllables were short, for the same two reasons.

<sup>1</sup> By the term 'open syllable' is meant one in which the vowel is not followed by a consonant, as in the words *so*, *we*, *she*, etc., or in *broken*, *taken*, etc. (divided *bro-ken*, *ta-ken*). A 'closed syllable', on the other hand, is so called because it is closed, or stopped, by a consonant after the vowel, as in *man*, *bolster*, *grammar*, etc. (divided) *bol-ster*, *gram-mar*)

Hence the modern difference in pronunciation between *tilling* and *tiling*, *canning* and *caning*, *laddy* and *lady*, etc. If it be asked why words like *name*, *came*, etc., which to-day are only pronounced as one syllable, have the long vowel, it must be remembered that they have not always been monosyllables. In Middle English the final *e* had a phonetic value, as is obvious from the poetry of the time, and thus they were disyllabic words, with their first syllable an open one. And the same is true of verbs like *meet*, *greet*, *sleep*, etc., which at first sight would seem to be closed syllables. Today, it is true, they are closed; but in the Middle English period they had the infinitive termination *-en*, which 'opened' them

Having, however, laid down the above as a general rule concerning the lengthening and shortening of vowels, we must note the following exceptions to it.

(i) In late Old English short vowels were lengthened in stressed syllables before the consonant combinations *nd*, *mb*, *ld*, and for the most part these remained long in Middle English. Hence the modern pronunciation of such words as *find*, *blind*, *bind*, *climb*, *comb*, *old*, *field*, etc., in spite of the fact that the vowels in these words are in closed syllables. In the case of many examples which would fall into this class, the vowel was later shortened again, probably because of the influence of a short vowel in a compound. For instance, according to the rule just enunciated we should expect *friend* to be pronounced with a long vowel, where in point of fact it has a short one. This is probably to be explained by analogy with *friendship*, where the lengthening did not take place because the first syllable was an unstressed one. With *friend* contrast *fiend*, where the long vowel has been preserved because no compound comparable to *friendship* exists. Shortening



also took place in Middle English if the combinations *nd*, *mb*, *ld*, were followed by a third consonant. So we have the modern *child*, which goes back to a long vowel, the plural *children*, which has a short one.

(ii) In a trisyllabic word the vowel of the first syllable was shortened (or if already short remained so) even though that syllable was an open one. Hence we get *hōly day* (two words), but *hōliday* (one word).

(iii) Vowels before the combination *st* were normally short in Middle English, in conformity with the rule laid down above: cf. the modern *best*, *fist*, *lost*, *rust*, etc. Nevertheless in a large number of modern English words the vowel is long before this combination: e.g. *fast*, *least*, *priest*, *ghost*, *host*, etc. The lengthening probably came from an inflected form, or from the plural, where the *st* combination was regarded as belonging to the second syllable, thus leaving the first syllable an open one; e.g. *hō-stes*, *gō-stes*, *prē-stes*, etc.

The third important change to note (and one which occurs rather later than those previously mentioned) concerns the long vowels however they originated, i.e. whether they had come down as such from Old English, whether they had once been short but for one reason or another had been lengthened, or whether they were in French loan-words, and had therefore not undergone the earlier changes as those in native words had. The results of this may be classified under three heads, as follows:

(i)  $\bar{e} > \bar{i}$ . E.g. *feet* (originally pronounced roughly like the modern *fate*) tended to take on its present-day pronunciation.

(ii)  $\bar{o} > \bar{u}$  (or  $\bar{u}$ ). E.g. *food*, *boon*, *doom*, (originally pronounced to rhyme with the modern *mode*, *bone*, *dome*, etc.) and *shoo* (shoe), originally like the modern *show*,

or approximately so, took on the pronunciation used today. The change started in the mid-fourteenth century; but later, in certain words, the resultant long  $\bar{u}$  sound was shortened to  $\bar{u}$ . E.g. *foot*, *book*. Perhaps this tendency to shortening of the vowel was at first a local one, peculiar to certain parts of England, whence it spread into other dialects, but there seems to have been no kind of consistency behind its adoption. Even today, though the accepted pronunciation of *shoot* has the long  $\bar{u}$ , amongst the natives of Kent and Sussex it is commonly pronounced with the corresponding short vowel, just the same as *foot* while conversely traces of the long vowel are still to be heard in the North of England, and certainly in Scotland, in words like *book*, *look*, *cook*, etc.

(iii)  $\bar{a}$ ,  $\bar{i}$ , and  $\bar{u}$  > the diphthongs<sup>1</sup>  $\bar{e}i$ ,  $\bar{a}i$ , and  $\bar{a}u$  respectively. E.g. the modern *game*, *fame*, *find*, *fire*, *house*, *cow*, which in early Middle English all had the long vowel.

It should be emphasised, however, that though most of these changes started in the late Middle English period, they were not finally completed until well into the sixteenth century. Linguistic changes develop slowly and unevenly, and there was probably a period of something like a century during which the pronunciation was fluctuating and uncertain. There is evidence that in certain words or in certain districts these vowels retained their old values for some years after 1500. For details the reader is again

<sup>1</sup> The term *diphthong* should only be employed, as it is here, in a phonetic sense of two vowel sounds which merge one into the other, e.g. *cow* ( $\bar{a} + \bar{u}$ ), *find* ( $\bar{a} + \bar{i}$ ), *cane* ( $\bar{e} + \bar{i}$ ). In writing it may be represented by one symbol only, as in *mice*, *lame*, etc., or by two, as in *house*, *mouse*, etc. The orthographic device by which two vowel-symbols are written together, as in *Cæsar*, *encyclōpædia*, etc. should be called a digraph. Phonetically their value is not that of a diphthong, but a simple vowel.

referred to Wyld's *Short History of English* and to Constance Davies' *English Pronunciation from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (1934).

And finally we find that in certain words, by a process known as metathesis, an *r* or an *s* came to change its position. The Old English verb *to burn* was *beornan*, which in Middle English gave the two alternative forms *bernan* and *brennan*. The latter was by far the more frequent, and is almost always used by Chaucer. In fact it persisted until the late fifteenth century, when the present-day form took its place, though a few examples of the older spelling with the initial *br-* are to be found even in the early sixteen-hundreds; and it is still to be seen in the cognate words *brand* (which incidentally is the modern Danish word for *fire*) and *brunt* (the hottest part of a battle, etc.). Metathesis of *r* occurs again in *bird* (originally *bryd*) and *through* (in the fourteenth century *thurh*, from Anglo-Saxon *ðurh*). *Clasp* was at one time *clapse*; and Chaucer tells us of his Friar that

Somewhat he lipped for his wantonnesse,

where we today should write *lisp*. In modern times the same process can be seen in the vulgar tendency to make *wasp* into *wops*, and is at the bottom of that trick of speech which we have come to call spoonerism.

### (iii) SPELLING

Changes in spelling are mainly orthographical and do not necessarily indicate a change in pronunciation. For instance, the long *ū*, through the influence of the practice adopted by French scribes, began to be written as *ou* as early as the mid-fourteenth century, yet for some while

after this it retained the old pronunciation. Thus *hūs* was writtn *hous*, and *mūs* came to be spelt *mous*, but it was some years before the vowel-sound ceased to rhyme (approximately) with that in the modern *goose*, and became diphthongised. Increasingly, too, the long *ō* was represented by *oo*, as *hoom* (home), *foo* (foe), *coomen* (to come). The transition was gradual and long-drawn-out. The poem *Seynt Julien* (1300) has the revised spelling *good*, but the *Cursor Mundi*, of the same date, has the older *gōd*, which is found even as late as 1420; but the *oo* form was general by 1500.

To pass from vowels to consonants, the hard *c* of Anglo-Saxon and early Middle English gave way to the letter *k* before the front vowels *e*, *i* and *y*, but was retained before the back vowels *a*, *o* and *u*. Thus the Anglo-Saxon *cýning* became *king*, *cēne* became *keen*, and *cēpan* became *keep*. Here again we see the Norman-French influence. The symbol *c* before a front vowel in French was always soft (the *s* sound), but in Old English and early Middle English it was sometimes hard, as in the examples just quoted. Obviously, then, when French words were introduced into English endless confusion in pronunciation would occur unless some regular and uniform system was adopted. Hence the practice grew up of following the French method: *c* was pronounced hard before a back vowel and soft before a front vowel; and in the case of those native words which had a hard *c* before a front vowel, the fact was indicated by writing it *k*. But then there were also native words where the *c* (written *ċ*) was pronounced with the present-day *ch* sound, which symbol came to represent it, so that the original Old English *ċild* became, in Middle English, *child*. The *ch* of most of our words which contain this combination (though not, of course, where it is pronounced like *k*, as in *character*, *chronic*, *chorus*, etc., all of

which come from Greek) had a similar origin.

In the same way the Old English *g*, which had always been pronounced like the modern *y*, was written as such (*ġiefan*=to give>*yeven*;<sup>1</sup> *ġearu*>*year*), the native symbol *ð* disappeared and was replaced by the combination *th*,<sup>2</sup> and the original *sc* in words like *scip* became the modern *sh*, all of them merely different ways of representing the same pronunciation. The first of these changes was necessitated by the introduction, through French influence, of a new 'soft' *g* before front vowels, with the phonetic value of the present-day *j* (*gentle*, *gesture*, etc.), though in those words where it was desired to retain the hard guttural before front vowels the *g* was written *gu* (e.g. *guide*, *guest*, *guld*, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Under French influence once more, the *cw* in words like *cwēn* (queen), *cwellen* (to kill), *cwic* (living) was replaced by *qu*, while certain words of French origin which had an initial unstressed *e* immediately before an *s*,

<sup>1</sup> On the later supersession of this form by that with the hard guttural *g*, due to Danish influence spreading from the Northern dialects, see pp. 44-45.

<sup>2</sup> A trace of the *ð* still remains in the *ye* of the pseudo-archaic *Ye Olde Bunne Shoppe*. The English definite article has never had the form *ye*, which is due to a misunderstanding, through ignorance, on the part of certain eighteenth-century antiquarians. It is not difficult to see that in written documents a badly formed *ð* might well look like a *y* with a curled tail, and as such it was treated by the eighteenth-century medievalists, most of whom had little real linguistic knowledge. So there grew up an affectation for writing *ye* in place of *the*; but the form is quite spurious.

<sup>3</sup> The rule regarding the pronunciation of the symbol *g* in modern English may be formulated as follows. Before the back vowels *a*, *o*, *u* it is always hard, as in *God*, *gander*, *gun*, etc. Before the front vowels *e* and *i* it is soft in words of romance origin (*gem*, *gesture*, etc.) and hard, (guttural) in words of Germanic origin (*get*, *gift*, etc.). There are however, a few romance words which originally had *gu*, where it is still hard though the *u* has been dropped from the spelling. E.g. *gump*

like *estraunge* (modern French *étrange*), tended to lose it, giving a resultant *straunge*, which later became *strange*. Many of these words (e.g. *squire*, *state*, *scutcheon*, etc.) are not difficult to recognise in modern English. It is perhaps more surprising to learn that *scour*, *scourge*, *scorn* and *scout* belong to the same class.

#### (iv) VOCABULARY

As might be expected, the changes in and the additions to the English vocabulary during the period from 1100 to 1500 were greater and more important than any of those which we have noticed in the Anglo-Saxon period. The main influence, of course, though by no means the only one, was that which came from the Norman invasion and conquest. The existence for some while of two languages side by side gave rise to synonyms, one from the native tongue and the other from the Norman French, which gradually became differentiated in meaning or usage. An example is to be found in the two words *wed* and *marry*. The former is the native term, and originally meant 'to give a pledge' (not merely in connection with matrimony, though today it is employed solely in this sense); the latter comes from the French and signifies, literally, 'to become a husband'. In modern English the two are more or less identical in meaning; *marry* is probably the more frequently used, though *wed*, now mainly provincial or journalistic, is felt to have more homely, sentimental associations, and certainly the noun *marriage* carries a more stilted and 'proper' suggestion than its synonym *wedding*. It is not difficult to see how this subtle differentiation arose. Amongst the Normans, who were almost all

of the noble, overlord class, a marriage would be a much more formal affair than with the native English, and would be accompanied with considerable ceremony, show and ecclesiastical ritual; but the wedding of Saxon underlings was simple, intimate and homely, and marked by a fair amount of free-and-easy merry-making. Hence the distinct associations of the two words. It is the difference between formally 'becoming a husband', with all the legal rights and social status that it conferred, and the giving of a pledge of love and fidelity. Something of the same distinction exists between the adjectives *kingly* and *royal*, or between the nouns *child* and *infant*, *meal* and *repast*, while no other word has ever been found that can adequately express all the feeling and associations of the English *home*.

We are taken back to the Norman conquest once again if we consider the respective words employed in modern English to describe on the one hand a living animal and on the other the meat that comes from it after it is killed. In the cases of the commoner species the former will usually be found to be a native word, the latter one of French origin. Take as an example the sheep. While it was living in the fields it was tended by native shepherds, and so it continued to be called by the native word—*sheep*; but as soon as it was killed and got into the kitchen it was dressed by French cooks and finally eaten by French nobility, and so it became *mutton* (from French *mouton*=sheep). Similarly we have the pairs *pig* and *pork*, *cow* (or *bullock*) and *beef*, *calf* and *veal*. Had the nobility of those days considered the cooked flesh of the rabbit a delicacy it is possible that we should by now be calling it *lappin* or some such name. But since they did not, we have to make the same word suffice for the flesh as for the living animal.

With the name of William the Conqueror are usually associated the feudal and the manorial systems, and from both a number of words which have become a permanent part of the English language were ultimately derived. Examples are *demesne*, *domain*, *castle*, *baron*, *livery*, etc. Under the Manorial System the centre of a 'district' was the Manor House or the Villa. The labourers who worked on the manorial estates were known as the *villeins*, and the small collection of hovels in which they lived was the *village*. The native word *tun* had previously been used, but now that this was displaced by the French term it rose in status and came to signify a larger unit, finally becoming, as we have seen, our word *town*. The elevation of a Saxon word in this way is unusual; more frequently the change was in the opposite direction. An excellent example of the way in which words can undergo this kind of alteration through the force of associated ideas is provided by the word *vilain*, cited above. Originally, as has been said, it signified a labourer on the manorial estate. But what impressed the feudal nobility most about the villeins was their coarseness, their uncouth behaviour and their total lack of refinement;<sup>1</sup> so the word came to mean 'a person of coarse behaviour or speech'—such as might be expected from a mere labourer—and when Chaucer wrote of his Knight that

He never yet no vileinye ne sayde

he intended us to understand that he had never been guilty of using coarse language. Later a further stage in the degradation of the word was reached, when it came to

<sup>1</sup> The French, on the other hand, appear to have been impressed rather by their uncouth appearance, since the adjective *vilain* in modern French means *ugly*.



acquire its modern significance. The terms *villain* and *villainy* are amongst the most condemnatory that we can apply to a person or his conduct today, but no more than eight hundred years ago they were quite colourless.

The Normans also established the beginnings of the modern English legal system, and here again a number of new words were introduced. As has been pointed out previously, the official language of the Law Courts, until well past the middle of the fourteenth century, was French, and consequently, though native words already existed for the principal crimes for which a man might be brought before the court, new terms of Norman-French derivation were substituted for them in legal indictments, though the native English word continued to be used in common speech, a distinction which, broadly speaking, still holds good today. So we get *arson* (first found in the Statute of Westminster, in 1275), *trespass*, *cheat*, *larceny*, *treason*, etc., while other terms, such as *embezzlement*, were added at later dates. Of the major crimes murder is about the only one for which the native term came to be recognised also as the legal one; and there is perhaps a reason for this. The other offences would be committed mainly against the nobility or, in the case of treason, against the crown; but murder was usually committed on the person of a fellow-Englishman. A villein might rob his overlord, trespass on his preserves, cheat him, even set fire to some of the buildings on his estate, but he did not murder him; he only did that to a fellow-villein with whom he had quarrelled.

Then there are a host of other legal terms that came in from the French during this Middle English period, some of which have passed into common currency, while others have remained part of the jargon of the law courts. They include *assize*, *justice*, *curfew*, *judge*, *jury*, *indict*, *verdict* (lite-

rally 'a true saying'), *commission*, *licence*, *statute*, *prison*, *prisoner*, *punish*, *plaintiff*, and, of course, the word *court* itself.

Next in importance to the feudal and the legal systems amongst the Norman contributions to our characteristic English institutions was probably the medieval ecclesiastical system, far more highly organised and elaborate than anything which the Anglo-Saxons had known. The English words *priest* and *bishop* had become too firmly established to be displaced. These were the only two ecclesiastical offices that the Saxons knew, and it was but natural, therefore, that the familiar terminology should remain; but in the Norman church there was a much more complex hierarchy, and as, when this was introduced into England, there were no words ready at hand to denote the various offices, the French terms were adopted; so we get coming in at this time *abbot*, *abbess*, *canon*, *curate*, *cardinal*, *friar*, *deacon*, *archdeacon*, while a Gallic alternative for *priest* was found in *parson*, which, strangely enough, has since become the more colloquial and familiar of the two. But perhaps it is not so strange, after all, for the older word had probably reverential associations that the newly-introduced French equivalent had not, and these forbade any kind of undignified, colloquial use of it.

No doubt many of the lower clergy, like Chaucer's poor parson, were of English descent, but in the years immediately after the Conquest most of the higher offices were held by Normans, and it was therefore but natural that the complicated ritual and the special services which they introduced, as well as certain abstract terms used in connexion with Christian doctrine, and even the parts of the church edifice itself, should be designated by French terms. For the small local building which had for so long been associated with the worship of the folk of the neighbour-

hood the English word *church* was retained, probably for the same reason that the priest continued to be called the priest. But the words *chapel*, *cathedral*, *abbey*, *convent*, *cloister*, *chantry*, *aisle*, *nave*, *chancel*, *altar* are all of French derivation, as are also *service*, *clerk* (in the ecclesiastical sense), *clergy*, *parish*, *apostle*, *conscience*, *confession*, *penance*, *prayer*, *absolution*, and even the word *religion* itself. Many others could be added to the list, but these will have to suffice.

Before leaving the subject of the medieval church and its influence on the English language, however, we may draw attention to two words which still exist in our vocabulary today but have lost all religious associations. They are *patter* and *canter*. The former is said to have come from *Pater Noster* (the opening words of the Latin version of the Lord's Prayer) and constitutes a somewhat pointed comment upon the manner in which the medieval folk apparently used to gabble through their devotions. The latter is an abbreviation of *Canterbury*, and was originally used to describe the pace at which the processions of pilgrims rode to Canterbury, to pay their respects at the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket.

Nearly all the terms connected with chivalry, with the exception of *knight*, could be put to swell our list of Norman-French words, and so could many of those which designate what we might call the 'luxury trades' of the time. The older, fundamental occupations—those of the smith, the shoemaker, the wheelwright, the weaver, the ploughman, the cook, the miller—in short those which were native to the island, had been long established here and probably continued to be performed mainly by natives—had native English names, and for the most part have preserved them to this day. But the new nobility, with their more fastidious tastes and their desire for a greater degree of

refinement, in the domestic sphere at any rate, than the English workmen could afford them, led to the infiltration into England of the 'luxury' trades of the Continent; so we get the mercer, the draper, the haberdasher, and the jeweller, all of them with French names for the simple reason that, first of all most of them were of French nationality, since such occupations were previously unknown in England, and secondly that none of them had much to do with the lives of the ordinary people. Their commerce was almost entirely with the better-off classes.

The case of the carpenter, in the light of what has just been said, is worth a moment's consideration. His trade would certainly seem to be one of the older and more fundamental ones, yet its name is not English but French.<sup>1</sup> The fact is that the Saxon craftsman was, in the eyes of the Normans, anything but a skilled or skilful artisan. He might serve for the construction of the simple native dwellings, but the more complicated work demanded by the aristocracy, with their continental standards, called for a higher degree of technical skill; so once again they went to France for their workmen. The same is true of the shoemaker, mentioned in the previous paragraph. He continued to cater for the general public of his day, but the luxury shoes of the nobility were made by a 'cordwainer'.

Medieval scholarship and learning, too, was instrumental in bringing many new words into the language; and here again most were of French origin, though a few, as we shall see later, came from the East. Even some of these, however, came through the French, into which language they had been adopted for some years before they

<sup>1</sup> The Anglo-Saxon word was *timbrend*, literally 'wood constructor'. Cf. the Gothic *timrja*, the word used by Ulphilas in his translation of the gospels to describe Joseph, the father of Jesus (Mark vi, 3).

reached England. As has been stated earlier in the present chapter, many of the scholars themselves were of French descent or French education, and for some time most learned treatises, if not in Latin, were written in French. So it is not surprising that so many of our learned and academic words should come from that source. One category is that which includes a large number of abstract terms and words implying a certain degree of moral judgement or an attitude of mind. These originated, so far as the English language is concerned, in the religious and philosophical treatises of the time. Examples are *mercy*, *pity*, *charity*, *beauty*, *humility*, *courtesy*, *repentance*, etc. and their corresponding adjectives. One has only to go through a passage of Chaucer and pick out all the abstract terms of this type to realise what a large percentage of them are of French extraction. Some, of course, had no equivalent in Anglo-Saxon, but in many cases there was a native term but it was ignored by the learned and left to the speech of the 'lewed' (i.e. unlettered), with the result that before long it became obsolete. In one or two instances, however, both the older English and the new French terms were employed side by side, though in course of time they took on rather different associations. *Love* and *charity* are cases in point. The native word has intimate and tender associations which the other does not possess. In fact, it is probably the association of *charity* with the better-off classes that is responsible for the suggestion of patronage that attaches to the common use of it today.

The science of astrology, which flourished in the Middle Ages and was taken very seriously, has supplied us with a number of words which, at one time specialised in their application, have since found their way into more general use. *Influence* is a typical example. Originally

employed with reference to the effect of the planets upon human destiny, it has now lost all its astrological associations and become a term of everyday currency. A disaster, as the word itself implies to those who pause to think about such things, was in the first place the inevitable result of an inauspicious astral conjunction, but it has long since lost this significance and in recent time has become one of those words so much overworked by journalists that it is in danger of losing any distinctive meaning it may have had. The phrases *in the ascendant* and *at the zenith* are now employed in a metaphorical more frequently than in a literal sense, while the adjectives *jovial*, *mercurial* and *saturnine*, once again take us back to the medieval astrologers, referring as they do to those particular types of temperament or qualities of character which were supposed to be due to the influence of the planets Jupiter (Jove), Mercury and Saturn respectively. The medical science of the day, such as it was, gave us *humour*,<sup>1</sup> *choler* and *choleric*, *sanguine*, *cordial* and *physic*, while from literature we get *tragedy* and *comedy*, though not always in the dramatic sense. It may be remembered that by the term *tragedy* Chaucer's Monk understood merely

a certyn storie  
Of him that stood in greet prosperitee  
And is y-fallen out of heigh degree  
Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

and that all his own 'tragedies' were short metrical tales *de casibus virorum illustrium*.

It was due to the French influence on medieval learning in England, too, that the word *very*, now one of the com-

<sup>1</sup> For the history of this word and its various changes of meaning, see p. 276.

monest in the language, was introduced. Originally an adjective spelt *verrai* and meaning true, it came gradually to be employed as an adverb and so displaced the native *ful* which had always served this purpose. Comparatively speaking, it was a late adoption. Chaucer employs it occasionally, though his usual word is the older *ful*<sup>1</sup>. It did not become generally accepted until about 1370 as an adjective, and in its adverbial sense not until the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century.

Another influence in introducing fresh words into the language was the Crusades. Those of us who are old enough to take our minds back to the Great War of 1914-1918 may recall how, when the British troops returned from France, they brought with them certain French words, usually corrupted, and how for a time they flourished as a kind of popular slang. Something of the same happened in the case of these medieval expeditions to the Holy Land, with the result that a number of words of Arabic or Eastern origin appear in the English language from the middle of the thirteenth century. One of them was *assassin*, said to have been applied originally to an oriental band of political murderers who poisoned their chosen victims with a distillation known as *hashish*. And there were, naturally, various terms of opprobrium for the much detested Moslems. *Infidel* and *muscreant*, both of them originally French words meaning merely 'unbeliever', took on a much more condemnatory colouring when once they had been applied to the Turk, while *Mahound* (Mahomet) was frequently used as a synonym for Anti-Christ. From the town of Mosul came the word *muslin* to denote the particular kind of fabric that was first made there, and Damascus likewise gave us *damask*,

<sup>1</sup> In the *Prologue* it occurs twice, while *ful* is found about sixty times.

while the verb *to hazard* takes us back to the beleaguering of the castle of Hasart in the late thirteenth century. To while away the time they spent waiting for the fortress to surrender, the besieging troops invented a new game of chance which they called after the place itself—*hazard*. By a natural and inevitable extension of meaning a *hazard* came to signify a risk, and later a verb was formed from the same root. Other words of Arabic, or at least of Eastern, origin are: *algebra*, *azure*, *scarlet*, *orange* (at one time *norange*) and, of course, the names of eastern animals such as the elephant, the panther and the crocodile, as well as the fabulous griffin and salamander. No doubt there were many words that gained currency for a while but have failed to survive.

To conclude this chapter, it may be mentioned that it was during the Middle English period that surnames were first adopted by Englishmen, though according to Camden, the famous antiquarian, the custom had started in France as early as 1000 A.D. For long they were used only by the upper classes—perhaps first of all by the French nobility—but the custom gradually spread. Originally ‘surnames’ were merely nicknames to distinguish one Dick from another Dick or one Tom from another Tom, and they died with the person who bore them; but in course of time they became hereditary, possibly because of the necessity, under the feudal system, of being able to establish one’s lawful succession to an estate before it could be passed on. Obviously, hereditary family names facilitated this, as names which changed from one generation to another made it a matter of extreme difficulty.

Surnames were derived from various sources: they might refer to some personal characteristic, as is the



case with names like *Whitehead*, *Goodman* and *Longfellow*, or they might come from occupations, as do *Tyler*, *Bowman*, *Baker*, *Fletcher* (i.e. arrow-maker, cf. Fr. *flèche* = arrow), etc. Others were place-names (e.g. *Attwater*, *Attwood*, *Fieldsend*, as well as obviously topographical ones), while still others, such as *Johnson*, *Jackson*, *Wilson*, *Robinson* were genealogical in origin; and allowance has also to be made for popular corruption of some appellations, particularly if they were of foreign derivation. As a result of investigations one authority has come to the conclusion that 'over a hundred years were required, after the Norman Conquest, to provide everybody, even for purposes of official record with a secondary description,' and that 'these distinctions, to the extent of more than half, were of the local class, half as many being genealogical.' But even at this date the greater part of these 'secondary names' were probably not hereditary, at least in the case of the ordinary person. The study of surnames is of great interest to the historian, the genealogist and perhaps even to the psychologist, but for the student of language it is only a side-line, though one which can prove fascinating and not altogether unenlightening.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A fairly extensive literature exists on surnames, which anyone interested in the subject would do well to consult. Though written a good many years ago, C. W. Bardsley's *English Surnames, Their Sources and Signification* (1873, Ninth Edition, 1915) is still quite authoritative. Amongst modern studies C. L'Estrange Ewen's *A History of the Surnames of the British Isles* (1931) is a scholarly and very detailed work, embodying much research. So are P. H. Reaney's *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (1958), new ed. (1961) and C. M. Matthew's *English Surnames* (1966). More popular but quite reliable and accurate are Ernest Weekley's *The Romance of Names* (1914), and *Surnames* (1917), as well as W. D. Bowman's *The Story of Surnames* (1931) and *What is Your Surname?* (1932)

## CHAPTER V

### THE RENAISSANCE AND AFTER

IN 1453 Constantinople, hitherto the seat of European learning, fell to the Turk, and the scholars who were assembled there fled to western Europe, bringing with them as much of their libraries as they could manage to rescue and transport. They settled at first mainly in Germany and Italy and so started that intellectual awakening of Europe which has come to be known as the Renaissance. This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of the nature or the widespread effects of this event. Suffice it to say that the full flood of the new learning reached England about the year 1500 and that it had a marked influence upon the language and the literature. So far as language is concerned, of course (and probably in the case of literature also), many of the developments would have taken place without the impact of the Renaissance; but the new scholarship and all that it implied did produce new forces and add new words to the vocabulary, while it also undoubtedly hastened those tendencies which were already discernible in the Middle English period, and therefore we are justified in regarding it as marking the beginning of the modern age in the history of the English language.

It was a classical Renaissance, and mainly a Latin one; hence the chief effect of it upon our vocabulary, as would be expected, was to introduce and give currency to words of Latin origin or from Latin roots. Not that

these had been entirely absent before; but those which had existed in the Middle English period had come mainly via French. Latin, of course, had not been entirely unknown to the clergy and to the monks, in fact a very large part of the Church service had been conducted in it and it had been used for a number of medieval religious treatises; but it had had very little direct effect upon the native tongue, possibly because it had come to be regarded as a sacred and not a secular medium of expression. Such words as *confession*, *regne* (kingdom), *honour*, *clamour*, *melody*, which are obviously of Latin descent, were French before they were English. But now we find new words being made direct from the Latin, and since the home of much of the new scholarship was Italy, Italian words also begin to make their appearance in English, especially in connexion with music and the arts. At first, as is only to be supposed, the new words were not easily absorbed into ordinary speech; they remained part of the vocabulary of scholarship; but gradually a number were popularised.

In the wake of the Renaissance followed the Reformation, and this again, though its importance was primarily religious and political, had its effect upon the language. The bitter religious controversies to which it gave rise during the next two centuries were productive of numerous words—most of them expressing odium or disapproval—which became current through contemporary polemics and so gained a permanent niche in the vocabulary, though no doubt there must have been many more which failed to survive their day and generation. Since England had, officially at least, become a Protestant country, most of these terms naturally applied to Catholics. The Catholic mind was just as fertile, but the soil in England, from the time of Elizabeth, being a Protestant soil, these never had a

chance to take root—save possibly the word *heretic*, which actually existed earlier but came into more general use after the middle of the sixteenth century. *Papist* and *papistical* both belong to the earlier part of the same century; so does *Romish*. *Puritan* first made its appearance in 1567 and was usually employed with a suggestion of disapproval, as when Shakespeare uses it of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. The chief characteristics of the Puritans that are remembered today are probably their sobriety of behaviour, their strict living, and a tendency to the adoption of a sanctimonious, somewhat pharisaical attitude, often the outcome of an exaggerated earnestness about their religion. All these are reflected in the words which they, and their predecessors the Calvinists, added to the language. It was they who gave currency to the word *saintly*; and at the other extreme it was they who gave to the word *reprobate*, which originally meant merely ‘tested and rejected’, the strong condemnatory meaning which it bears today. The Nonconformist conscience first manifested itself amongst the Puritans, too, and they did not allow themselves or others to forget the fact. It is perpetuated today in words like *conscientious* and *conscience-stricken*, while the emphasis they laid upon altruism is stamped on words like *selfish* and *self-denial*. A few years later the Royalists hoist them with their own petard by coining the phrase *self-righteousness*.

A very important outcome of the Reformation was the various English translations of the Bible, the chief being Tyndale’s in 1526, and, more important, the Authorised Version in 1611. Perhaps the latter was more influential than any other single factor in ‘fixing’ the English language and setting some kind of a standard, for throughout the next three centuries it remained the people’s book, which they heard read Sunday by Sunday and with which

they became familiar as with no other. The fact that, save for a word here and there which has changed its meaning, we still feel that the English of the Bible is the English of today is witness to this.

The biblical contribution to metaphor and our stock of household phrases we shall discuss later. At present we must note two other respects in which it is important. In the first place it has been a strong formative influence on the style of many an eminent writer and so has played a definite part in shaping the literary language. And secondly it has provided us with new words which, unlike many of those which originated with the classical scholars, were early adopted into the spoken tongue and have remained in it ever since. It was, for example, Tyndale, who gave us the word *congregation* in its modern sense, preferring it to the more orthodox *church* as a translation of the Greek *ecclesia*. Tyndale wrote under a strong Protestant tradition, and fought shy of anything which might be construed to suggest the Roman Church or to justify its claims. For the same reason, probably, he preferred *elder* to *priest*. From Coverdale we get *loving-kindness*, while the Authorised Version, if it did not give us many new words, performed an inestimable service by preserving and perpetuating older ones like *firmament*, *raiment*, *apparel*, *lust* (desire), which might otherwise have died out. As we have seen in an earlier chapter (p. 47), the translators adopted a vocabulary which was predominantly native in character, together with a style which was for the most part straightforward and simple, and in virtue of these facts they must take much of the responsibility for the subsequent development of English. For three hundred years anyone who set pen to paper was well acquainted with the Bible, and many had also been nurtured in the classics. It will be

interesting to see what kind of a style is produced by an age which is very largely ignorant of both.

The contribution of Shakespeare (a considerable one) must also be dealt with elsewhere. Here it is sufficient to say that his works and those of his contemporaries reflect not only the Renaissance culture and the Protestant Reformation, but also a growing national consciousness. There is a distinctive character about the language of Shakespeare and his age as there was not about the language of a hundred years earlier. It is difficult to define, but it can be felt by anyone who has read fairly widely in both periods. And then there were the voyages of discovery which opened up new lands and brought men into touch with foreign parts. And last, but by no means least, the invention of printing was bound to have a far-reaching effect upon the development of the language. Three aspects of it may be noticed here, viz.,

(i) It tended to establish a 'standard' language and to discredit dialect. Previously, as we have seen, though the East Midland dialect had for some while been gaining the ascendancy, each dialect had its own literature and authors tended to write in the language which was spoken in their own part of the country. Printing altered this. Henceforth dialects bore the brand of inferiority, and though they continued to be spoken (to a limited extent, of course, they still are), they fell out of literary use.

(ii) It served to popularise and give currency to new coinages and newly introduced words. When a term 'got into print' it had become an accepted part of the language and was not confined to a small group of persons or to one part of the country.

(iii) It tended to fix spelling, about which there had been a great deal of uncertainty before. The publication

of Johnson's Dictionary in the middle of the eighteenth century, of course, was the really decisive factor here, but Caxton did manage to impose some kind of standardisation and to reduce the former chaos to something like order. But in doing this he was, indirectly, responsible for another peculiar characteristic of the English language as it exists today: the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation. The spelling was more or less fixed by the end of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century and has altered very little since, save in a few minor respects, but the pronunciation has been constantly changing, with the result that in many words today there is little relation between the two. This is a peculiarity very confusing to the foreigner, and one which he finds it difficult to understand; but then the English language was not evolved for the foreigner, but for the English, and in accordance with their own particular bent, and they never worry themselves unduly about it. Proposals to overhaul the spelling system and render it more nearly phonetic have never found much favour or even aroused much interest, save amongst a few cranks who seem to have made the crusade for reformed spelling their life's mission.

All these factors, then—the influence of Renaissance scholarship, the religious controversies arising out of the Reformation, the various translations of the Bible, the efflorescence of literature towards the end of the sixteenth century, the emergence of a national consciousness, the discoveries of new lands by navigators, with the consequent opening up of trade, and the invention of printing—combined to make the language after 1500 'English' in a way that that of Chaucer and his age had never been.

It is always difficult to estimate the precise extent of the vocabulary of a language at any given period, for so

much depends upon what we count as vocabulary. Are we, for instance, to include technical terms, which are normally employed only by specialists? Or even suppose we exclude these, should we count as part of the current vocabulary words which certainly exist and are to be found entered in the standard dictionaries, but which are scarcely ever used? It is well-nigh impossible to say how many words existed in English by, say, the year 1600 (that is a century after the full tide of the Renaissance had reached England), and it is equally impossible to compute the number of words which came in as a result of that influence. Nor does it really matter. What is of much more interest and importance is to realise the nature of the influence and the way it affected the subsequent development of English as a vehicle of expression, whether oral or written.

In the first place it gave rise to a number of synonyms which have enabled us to make nice distinctions in meaning which otherwise would not have been possible. This is especially the case with adjectives. In many instances we shall find these words falling into groups of three, one from a native root, one from the French and one from the Latin. All have roughly the same signification (i.e. they represent the same general idea and often express a quality pertaining to one basic noun), yet there are subtle differences in usage which can only be appreciated by one who is closely conversant with the language and is accustomed to weigh the precise value and significance of words. Take as an example the words *royal*, *regal* and *kingly*, all three of them adjectives connected notionally with the noun *king*. *Royal* (of French origin) is the commonest and at the same time the least colourful. It merely means 'pertaining to a king'. Thus we speak of the royal coach, the royal family, the royal signature, a royal person-



age, etc., without implying any specific quality or characteristic of the thing or person described. But *regal* (from the Latin root) suggests the pomp, splendour and majesty of kingship, or rather of the external trappings that traditionally accompany it, while *kingly* (of native English origin) refers to those gracious qualities of character which we associate with the ideal king. To the list might be added *real*, which was used in the sense of *royal* till well past the middle of the fifteenth century, but by a hundred years later had become completely obsolete in this sense.<sup>1</sup>

In a group of synonyms of this kind it will usually be found that the more commonplace one is of French derivation, that the native one has an intimate and more human signification, while that of Latin origin carries a suggestion of formality and impressiveness. *Friendly* (Eng.), *amicable* (Lat.) and *amiable* (Fr.) illustrate the same principle. Or again, *infantile* is a more or less colourless term, meaning 'associated with the period of childhood'; *childish* (a native root), on the other hand, as used in such expressions as 'childish laughter', 'childish innocence', carries a certain tender and affectionate suggestion with it, though it may be deprecatory when used of the behaviour of an adult. But much more deprecatory is the Latin *puerile*, which indicates on the part of the person using the word a contempt for, and a sense of superiority to, the conduct so described. In most people's minds there is a very clear distinction between *ghost* and *spirit*,<sup>2</sup> as there is between *paternal* and *fatherly*, while the *big* men of an age

The ordinary word *real* has, of course, no connexion with it, being derived not from *rex* (a king) but from *res* (a thing), cf. the legal term *real estate*.

<sup>2</sup> It is noticeable that there is now a tendency in ecclesiastical language to substitute the expression *Holy Spirit* for *Holy Ghost*

(Norse) are very different from the *great* men (Anglo-Saxon); and *large* (a word of French derivation) would be altogether inappropriate in either of these senses when applied to a human being. In some cases the entry into the language of a word from the classical tongues has meant that an older synonym has gradually developed a completely new meaning. *Caitiff*, from the Old French, had become part of the vocabulary of English soon after 1100, and meant *prisoner*, in which sense we find it used in Chaucer and several other Middle English writers. It is even found in this sense in Spenser, though by his day it was becoming archaic. Its ultimate derivation was, of course, the Latin *captivus*. But when *captive* came into English direct from the Latin instead of passing through the intermediate stage of French, the older term came to mean a scoundrel, presumably by association of ideas, since people who were kept in captivity had usually committed some crime. The same difference in meaning between two words ultimately from the same source is to be seen in the cases of *frail* and *fragile*, *sure* and *secure*.

Another feature of the English language which we owe to the Renaissance (and not altogether unconnected with the subjects discussed in the preceding two paragraphs) is our habit of using an adjective of classical derivation to correspond to a native noun. Thus we talk of a *hand* (Anglo-Saxon), but the adjective is *manual*. True, there is an adjective *handy*, but its meaning is quite different. And in the same way *nasal* is not the equivalent of *nosey* any more than *urban* is of *towney*. *Feminine* conveys a meaning quite distinct from *womanly*, while *manly*, *masculine* and *virile* all have their own peculiar shades of meaning. A very long list could be compiled of words like these. That the English language is the richer for such nice distinctions no one can doubt.

Earlier in this chapter reference has been made to the contribution of the Puritans during the Commonwealth period. The Commonwealth was followed in 1660 by the Restoration, and with this came a further influx of French words and phrases. Readers of Dryden's play *Marriage à la Mode* (1673) may recall that there the author satirises the current fashion of interlarding conversation with French tags and phrases. In his day it was a fashionable habit, thought to be a mark of 'politeness', but it did not altogether die out even in the next century, and in the preface to his Dictionary we find Dr. Johnson complaining that 'our language has been gradually departing from its original Teutonic character and deviating towards a Gallic structure and phraseology.' For long the tendency was to preserve the original French pronunciation and stress. In some words like *brunette*, *burlesque*, *caprice*, etc., they are preserved approximately to this day, but in others, such as *cadet*, the stress only is preserved, the pronunciation being anglicised. Until well past the middle of the eighteenth century the word *oblige* was pronounced *obleeege*, as is apparent from Pope's couplet,

Fearing e'en fools, by flatterers besieged,  
And so obliging that he ne'er obliged.

The precise date when it went out of general use is difficult to ascertain, but it was certainly before the year 1800, though according to Jespersen it was used by Wilkie Collins (no doubt as an old-fashioned affectation) as late as the middle of the next century. The person mainly responsible for its anglicisation was Lord Chesterfield, who regarded the fashionable pronunciation of his day as a Gallic barbarism.

This conflict between the native and the anglicised pronunciation of a word of French origin is well illustrated in modern times by the noun *envelope*. Twenty years ago only the uneducated would pronounce the first syllable as any other than *on-*, a modification of the French *en-*, and probably the majority of people still pronounce it in that way, but the anglicised form, rhyming with *pen*, is frequently heard amongst all classes today, and is even favoured by the B.B.C. In another twenty years the French pronunciation, already frowned upon by some writers on English usage, may have disappeared completely, or at least be regarded as pedantic. And similarly there is an increasing tendency to sound the final *t* in *valet*, which would have been a vulgarity only a few years ago.

These few observations lead us on to the more general topic of changes in pronunciation which occurred in the few years after the Renaissance, i.e. in the early modern period. Sound-change at any time constitutes an exceedingly complex and intricate problem, as so many factors are involved. Consequently we can only give here the more important, and even these only in very general terms. To most of the broad principles that are laid down a number of exceptions can be found, though even these exceptions follow rules of their own. The student who desires a more detailed treatment is referred to the appropriate section in Wyld's *Short History of English*, where he will find the question discussed by one who has made it his life's study.

For the most part the changes in pronunciation noticed during the early modern period are not new, but rather are in the nature of a completion of those which had already begun in the Middle English period and to which attention has been drawn in the previous chapter. The chief of them may be grouped as follows:

(i) Short  $\bar{a}$  was lengthened before the consonants  $s$ ,  $f$  and  $th$ , thus giving us the modern long  $\bar{a}$  in words like *bath*, *father*, *rather*, *ask*, *task*, *flask*, *master*, *cast*, *chaff*, *craft*, etc., despite the fact that all these vowels were in closed syllables (see pp. 70-1). In the northern part of England, it is true, there is still a tendency to pronounce a short  $\bar{a}$ , or something approaching it, in most of these words, and the habit probably has a historical foundation, but it is not accepted in strict standard pronunciation. Rather it represents what Wyld would call Modified Standard. The lengthening did not take place in all words and amongst all speakers at the same time, but it seems to have been fairly general by the beginning of the eighteenth century. In the word *grass*, on the other hand, Wyld avers that a long  $\bar{a}$  was pronounced as early as the Restoration period.

(ii) Lengthening of short  $\bar{a}$  also took place in those words like *palm*, *calm*, *half*, *calf*, etc., where the consonant  $l$ , standing immediately before a lip-consonant, was at one time pronounced but then became silent. Again, the process was a gradual one and probably was the result of an ever-decreasing prominence being given to the  $l$  sound. How this would cause a lengthening of the short  $\bar{a}$  will be appreciated by the student if he first pronounces *cālf* (with short  $\bar{a}$  and  $l$  both sounded), then repeats the experiment, but just as the tongue is in position to produce the  $l$ , gives only the slightest suggestion of it and passes on to the  $f$  sound. He will find that almost inevitably the former short  $\bar{a}$  is lengthened. The suppressed  $l$ , with the consequent lengthened  $\bar{a}$ , was to be found in the late sixteenth century, but was apparently regarded as a fashionable affectation. In Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1593) the pedant Holofernes ridicules the courtly Don Adriano de Armado on the ground that 'he is too picked, too

spruce, too affected, too odd. He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argumēt. He clepeth a calf *cauf*, half *hauf*; neighbour vocatur *nebour*: *neigh* abbreviated *ne*.<sup>1</sup>

It may be added that in some districts of southern England, amongst the working classes, *palm*, *calm*, etc. are still pronounced with the short *ǣ* and the consonant *l*, the standard pronunciation being considered affected.

(iii) By the end of the sixteenth century the long *æ* in words like *cake*, *ale*, *dame*, *fame*, which, as we have seen (p. 73), had already undergone some degree of modification in the Middle English period itself, had taken on the modern pronunciation (*ē*). Into the same category fall a number of words of French origin (e.g. *change*, *danger*, *safe*) which came in during the years following the Norman Conquest and were originally spelt with the symbols *au* (*chaunge*, *daunger*, etc.). Orthographically the *u* had disappeared from most of them by the end of the fourteenth century and the vowel was pronounced as a long *æ*.<sup>1</sup> Its subsequent history was then parallel with that of the same vowel in other Middle English words.

Exceptions to this general rule are to be found in *chance*, *chant*, *grant*, *branch*, *aunt*, etc., where the pure long *ā* is still pronounced. Wyld suggests that though all these origi-

<sup>1</sup> A modern illustration of the same process is to be found in the tendency in some circles to pronounce *laundry* as *lāndry*. Even in Middle English the change was not accepted in all words. We still have *daunt*, *taunt*, *flaunt*, *staunch*, etc. In the case of the last-mentioned, however, there is an alternative spelling and pronunciation in the verb *to stanch*, and the surgical term *to lance* is merely a variant of *launch*, which spelling is to be found in Nathaniel Lee's play *Constantine the Great* (1684). What principle, if any, underlay the acceptance or rejection of the 'reformed' spelling and pronunciation it is difficult to determine.

nally had the *au* spelling, just as did *change*, etc., the pronunciation has come from a Middle English dialect which had a short vowel. This was subsequently lengthened in Standard English, but too late to undergo the same transformation as the earlier long *ā*.

Perhaps a word may also be said here on the modern pronunciation of the long *ā* in *clerk*, *Berkeley*, *Berkshire*, *Derby*, etc., which, despite the apparent discrepancy in spelling, is historically correct. The fact is that the orthographical combination *er*, when followed by another consonant, was pronounced *ār* from medieval times. Indeed Wyld points out that in certain parts of the country it appears to have persisted until well into the eighteenth century, and as illustrations he quotes the (presumably) phonetic spellings, or misspellings, *sarve*, *sarvent*, *sartainly*, *Jarmany*, for *serve*, *servant*, *certainly*, *Germany*, from the correspondence of Lady Wentworth, while a parallel modern instance is to be found in the vulgar pronunciation *larn* for *learn* and *varmint* for *vermin*. But by Lady Wentworth's day in most of the words containing this combination Standard English had substituted a 'spelling' pronunciation for the historical one. In a few instances, however (mainly, though not solely, personal and place names), the older vowel sound remained, so that we must still say *heart*; *hearth* (but not *earth*) and *clerk* (M.E. *hert*, *herth*, *clerk*) with the long *ā*. The Americans, it is true, pronounce the last of these as it is spelt (i.e. to rhyme with *work*), but in British English this is considered a vulgarism. The process, however, is only the same as that which has given rise to the standard, recognised pronunciation of ninety-nine per cent. of the words of this type.

(iv) We have seen in the previous chapter that the Anglo-Saxon and early Middle English long *e* (roughly

the same as in the modern *say*, *gay*, etc.) was being modified in the direction of long *i* (as in the present-day *tea*), for some time previous to 1500. The change was complete by about 1550. Orthographically the vowel was represented by *ee* in some words, *ea* in others, and in others again by *ie*. Examples are *feet*, *seek*, *deep*, *heat*, *seat*, *beat*, *eat*, *field*, *believe*, etc.

(v) By the end of the sixteenth century the original long *i* (as in modern *see*) had completed the process of diphthongisation to *ai*. Examples: *fire*, *write*, *light*, *life*, *ride*, *blind*, *wife*, etc.

(vi) The Middle English long *ū* (pronounced approximately as in modern *chew*, *Jew*, etc.) had become the diphthong *au* by the early part of the sixteenth century. As we have seen (pp. 74-5), the spelling had been *ou* long before the pronunciation had changed. Examples: *house*, *mouse*, *cow*, etc.

These constitute the most important changes in pronunciation that took place in the years following immediately upon the Renaissance. As has been said before, the principles laid down are very broad and general. They have, perhaps, been over-simplified and comparatively little account has been taken of the exceptions or the various factors which caused them to be modified in specific words or groups of words. But in an introductory survey of this kind a detailed treatment would only lead to confusion. It is better to try to grasp general principles first, and then, at a later stage, to proceed to a study of their modification in particular circumstances.

So far as spelling is concerned, as has been pointed out at the beginning of the present chapter, the Renaissance and the coming of the printed book tended to set and standardise it, and most of the modern conventions



were evolved during the next century or century and a half. It is true that words now ending in *-ic*, like *music*, *public*, etc., were commonly spelt with *-ick* until almost the end of the eighteenth century, but for the most part it is true to say that there has been little change in the spelling of English since the Restoration. By 1500 the final unsounded *e* had come to be accepted as the sign of a long syllable (e.g. *home*, *stone*, *bone*, etc.), and was put on to words where it had no historical existence, on the analogy, as has been suggested on pp. 70-1, of those where it had and where, because it was at one time actually sounded, it opened the previous syllable, thus lengthening the vowel. Again, the symbols *u* and *v*, and *i* and *j* respectively were for long interchangeable, but by the end of the seventeenth century the convention had become more or less rigidly established that *u* and *i* represented vowel sounds and *v* and *j* consonants. As is only natural, these conventions appeared first of all in the printed word, where uniformity of practice was not only desirable but essential. In manuscript writing the older habits hung on much longer and died hard.

Another result of the Renaissance, which is still to be seen in our vocabulary, was a pedantic reversion to a Latinised spelling for certain words which had come into the language through the French and had long since lost all traces of their ultimate Latin origin. Here is to be found the explanation of the unpronounced *b* in *debt* and *doubt*. In Middle English both of these words were written as they were pronounced, *dette* and *doute*. They had been written thus previously in French and for several hundred years no Englishman had seen any objection to their retaining this spelling. But certain Renaissance scholars were anxious to show that their ultimate origin was

the Latin *debitum* and *dubitum*, so they insisted that the *b* should be inserted in writing the words, though they continued to be pronounced in the same way as before, not, however, without objections on the part of the learned. Thus, to come back to the pedant Holofernes of *Love's Labour's Lost*, we find him complaining:

'I abhor such rackers of orthography, as to speak *dout*, fine, when he should say *doubt*; *det*, when he should pronounce *debt*—*d, e, b, t*, not *d, e, t*.'

In the same way *indite* became *indict*, and *quire* became *choir*, to show that it was derived from the Latin *chorus*. In all of these the intrusive letter had no phonetic value, but in a few words it did actually come to be sounded. Thus *fault* (spelt thus about 1530 or a little earlier) was previously *faute*, the intrusive *l* being due to the analogy of the Latin *fallita* while *perfect* (from the Latin *perfectus*) appears in Chaucer as *perfyte* or *parfit*. The word *island* is an example of a veritable scholastic howler. The *s*, again, is a pedantic intrusion intended to show a connexion with the Latin *insula* (perhaps suggested by *isle*, which was felt to be an abbreviation or a diminutive of the longer word); but as a matter of fact *island*, which never appears with the *s* until 1546, was a purely native word, coming from the Anglo-Saxon *igland*!

The grammatical changes that came about in English during the early modern period are few, though they are of importance in that they were in the direction of greater simplification. For instance, the conjugational inflexions in the plural verbs finally disappeared. It is true that a survival can be found in the *waxen in their mirth* of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it was already antiquated. The possessive adjective *its* had come into general use by the end of the seventeenth century, in place of the

older *his*, which henceforth was confined to the masculine gender where previously it had been used for the masculine and neuter alike.<sup>1</sup> In the nouns the addition of *s* was adopted as the recognised and general method of forming the plural, and many words which had formerly taken other inflexions or had made their plurals by mutation of a vowel in the root-syllable now conformed to the more usual type, while the mutated comparisons of adjectives gave place to the simple addition of the suffixes *-er* and *-est* to the positive degree.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, by the end of the seventeenth century the modern grammatical system had come into existence. From being a complex, highly inflected language, English had become a comparatively simple one with scarcely a trace of the old inflexional system left, save in the pronouns, while as a result of the additions to the vocabulary which came about as a result of the Renaissance it was better equipped for the expression of abstract ideas and niceties of thought than it had been in the Middle Ages. On the other hand the learning and scholasticism of the Renaissance tended to produce certain affectations of style and diction, and a certain artificiality, to which is perhaps traceable the distinction, which becomes more marked as time goes on, between literary and spoken English.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matthew v. 13, 'if the salt have lost *his* savour, wherewith shall it be salted?' (Authorised version, 1611).

<sup>2</sup> Except in the case of *elder* and *eldest*, on which see p. 32.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE GROWTH OF VOCABULARY

By the middle of the seventeenth century the language had more or less assumed its present form so far as grammar, spelling and pronunciation are concerned. There have, of course, been slight modifications in the succeeding three hundred years, more especially in pronunciation and spelling than in grammar; but from the Restoration onwards the chief developments have been in the direction of an enlargement of the vocabulary on the one hand, and changes in the meaning of words on the other. The one is an inevitable outcome of the need to express new ideas, new perceptions, new shades of meaning, or to give names to new inventions and new discoveries. As knowledge grows, so language grows with it. The other reflects a changing psychological attitude and a changing sense of social values. The significance given by the eighteenth century to the word *polite*, or by the nineteenth to the word *gentleman*, tells us a great deal about the mentality and the outlook of those two ages, just as a future generation will be able to gather much of interest about the character of our own age from the connotation we give to terms like *Victorian*, *middle-class*, *bourgeois*, *public school*, which at one time were all terms of solid respect but now have about them a suggestion of disparagement.

The question of change of meaning is subject-matter for a subsequent chapter. Here we are concerned with the growth of vocabulary. The Oxford Dictionary records over

400,000 words; Johnson's Dictionary (1755) about 48,000. The difference seems enormous; but two considerations should be borne in mind in making a comparison. First, Johnson, despite his industry, was not exhaustive. He had not at his disposal an erudite editorial staff, as was the case with the modern work. He had to rely mainly upon his own researches and his extensive reading, so that although the resulting work was the most nearly exhaustive of its kind which had appeared up to that date, it was not completely so. Furthermore, Johnson was rather conservative and would not always recognise words as legitimate English, even though they were in fairly common use, unless they had been given respectable literary currency. For instance, he stigmatised *fun*, *stingy*, and *clever* as 'low' words, and a certain number of others which we find in the literature, and especially the plays, of his day were not recorded at all. Thus the fact that a word is not found in his dictionary is not absolutely conclusive proof that it was unknown at the time. Secondly, we must remember that the Oxford Dictionary includes a number of academic and technical terms, which can scarcely be called part of the English language proper, while obsolete words are also listed. In making a comparison, then, these facts have to be borne in mind.

The extent of our individual vocabularies probably varies considerably from person to person. It has been estimated that Shakespeare used about twenty thousand words and Milton eight thousand, but in both cases, of course, the figures are deceptive. Both indulged in poetic licence (Shakespeare to a greater extent than Milton) and coined words, or gave special meanings to words, which would not normally be recognised, while the nature of their writings made it impossible for either to use all the words they

knew. This is true of almost all writers. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* it has been computed that a 'normally educated person' (whatever that may mean) has a vocabulary of about twenty-five thousand words, though on the other hand the majority of us use no more than some four or five thousand of them in our daily conversation and writing; and the advocates of Basic English contend that for all ordinary purposes a person can express himself adequately in as few as eight hundred and fifty! The accuracy of all these figures is a matter of dispute. But one fact at least does come out of them: that the most gifted of writers only use a very small proportion of the resources of our language, while the 'average' person uses little over one per cent.

The fact is that the English language is the richest, and has the most extensive vocabulary, of any in the world. This is partly due to historical factors, partly to 'the genius of the language' and its readiness to absorb words from foreign tongues, or to make new ones where existing terms are not adequate. New words have come into the English language, and the vocabulary has been enlarged, in a number of ways. The following are the chief of them.

1. *By Imitation or Onomatopœia.* This is perhaps one of the oldest, if also the crudest, methods of word-making, and as we have seen in the opening chapter, it has been postulated as one of the most important sources of all language. A number of words in our vocabulary today, especially those which describe some kind of sound, are obviously imitative in character. Examples are numerous. As a few representative ones we may take *bang*, *pop*, *buzz*, *click*, *whizz*, *rumble*, *mumble*, *hiss*, *giggle*, etc. The name of the cuckoo is clearly an attempt to represent its distinctive

call, and it is generally accepted that the Latin *barbarus*, from which is derived our own word *barbarian*, was, in its origins, a verbal imitation of the uncouth and unintelligible babbling (as it sounded to the Roman ears) of foreign tribes. The imitative nature of words such as these is quite obvious, but there would also seem to be an onomatopœic or suggestive principle underlying many terms in daily use which have not so simple and elementary a significance. The word *slither*, for instance, has a slippery suggestion about it, while words like *awe* and *awful* remind us of the exclamation *ooh!*, denoting surprise and wonder. The vowels *i* and *e* occur in many words with which the idea of lightness or slenderness is associated, while conversely *u* or *oo* often carry a suggestion of something massive or heavy. Similarly the consonants *p*, *t*, *k* give the impression of quick action (e.g. *pommel*, *pitch*, *torrent*, *kick*, *clutch*); the combination *bl* is frequently employed to suggest inflation, possibly from the inflation of the cheeks when it is being pronounced (e.g. *blow*, *blast*, *blister*, *bloated*, *bladder*, *blob*); *fl* is found in words where there is a suggestion of hurry, such as *fly*, *flee*, *fling*, *flash*, *flicker*; while *wh* is representative of something subdued and quiet, as in *whisper*, *whimper*, *whine*, *whilst*, and possibly in the adjective *white*. A large number of the words suggesting stability, too, begin with the consonant combination *st*: *stop*, *stay*, *station*, *still*, *stand*, *stable*, *steadfast*, *stage*, *stall*, *stanch*, *staunch*, *statue*, *stature*. This process, of course, cannot be pursued too far. All words in *wh*, for instance, do not stand for something subdued and quiet (e.g. *whistle*), nor is the vowel *i* always associated with lightness. But the fact that onomatopœia can be detected in a number of cases shows that in the past it has been one of the principles underlying word-making.

2. *An older word is given a new significance or its meaning*

*is extended* This is a method which has been used so extensively that it cannot be adequately dealt with in a mere one or two paragraphs. It is treated in greater detail in the next chapter, on 'Change of Meaning'. A few examples may, however, be given here. If we look up the meaning of the word *literary* in any modern dictionary we shall probably find that the first definition runs something like this 'Belonging to letters or learning, appertaining to literature'. This is now the commonly accepted meaning of the word. Yet Johnson's Dictionary does not record it in this sense at all. In his day it was not a word that was much used, and when it was it meant 'alphabetical'. Again, we all know what we mean by a pedant—one who likes to display his learning and is over-particular about trivialities which are of academic interest only. But to Shakespeare it meant a schoolmaster. Here, then, is an example of what was at one time a very general term, but which has since been given a specialised meaning. Incidentally the change is indicative of the popular attitude towards schoolmasters.

Perhaps an even better example is to be found in the verb *to manufacture*, which, as most people know, means literally 'to make by hand'. But modern usage nearly always employs it with the opposite meaning: a manufactured article and a hand-made article are entirely different things. Then there is the word *radical* (basic, going to the root of things). It first made its appearance in the seventeenth century, when it was used in the sense of *thorough*. Then it was applied to that school of theologians who, not content with accepting the orthodox teachings of the Church and the orthodox interpretation of the Scriptures, wanted to probe to the bottom of things and search out truth for themselves. Naturally, they were looked at



somewhat askance by the average Churchman, and so the word began to take on a suggestion of disapproval and became associated with the idea of revolution and disrespect for established authority. By the mid-nineteenth century it had assumed a political complexion, and again a similar development took place; and in certain country districts in the South of England, in the early years of this century, the present writer remembers to have heard it frequently used amongst elderly folk in the sense of 'prodigal' or 'ne'er-do-well'. He has heard more than one person stigmatised as 'a proper radical'; more than once has he known the parable of the prodigal son referred to as 'the radical son', and he distinctly recalls the disappointment of an old lady when she found that George Eliot's novel *Felix Holt, the Radical*, was not, as she had expected it to be, the story of a rake's progress. The explanation of this use of the word is fairly obvious. In the later nineteenth century, in the very conservative agricultural districts of southern England, the word *Radical* would stand for all that was most to be detested, and so with a particular generation of southerner it became a synonym for a scoundrel.

Another word that has undergone a similar change is the now familiar *plunder*. Originally meaning no more than 'household effects', it was a German word and came to England with Prince Rupert and his troops at the time of the Civil War.

It is an interesting fact, incidentally, that wars and periods of conflict, when partisan feeling ran high, have been responsible for a change or extension in the meaning of a number of words. The modern significance of the term *propaganda* is to be traced to the Great War of 1914-1918 (see pp. 170-171), and that of 1939-1945 gave us a new

meaning for *militia*, a new application of *black-out* (which was, until then, a theatrical term to describe the darkening of the stage) and a new use for the verb *to evacuate*. Previously a town or a tract of country was evacuated. Now it is the people themselves.

This last is probably the most recent example of a word which has extended its meaning or taken on a new signification while at the same time preserving the older one. A glance through a dictionary at a few common, everyday words with a view to discovering the number of meanings attached to each will suffice to show how the resources of the language have been augmented by the application of this principle. Take the word *board*. This can stand for (i) a plank of wood, (ii) a table, (iii) the food served on the table (in such an expression as 'to pay for one's board'), (iv) a number of people who sit around a table, as a board of directors, etc., (v) a plane surface made of wood, as a notice-board, etc., (vi) the deck of a ship. And then there are the various meanings of the verb 'to board'. This is but one example. There are others with meanings just as varied and numerous.

3. *A word which is normally one part of speech is used as another.* It is one of the characteristics of the English language that it is possible to use the same word as noun, verb, adjective and many other parts of speech. But, for instance, is normally a conjunction; but when we say, 'But me no buts' we are using the word as a verb and a noun respectively. If, however, we describe the clause which follows the semicolon in the last sentence as the 'but' clause, then we are employing it as an adjective. The most frequent interchange is possibly that between noun and verb. Thus from the noun *park*, in the sense of an open space where cars may be left, is coined the verb *to*

*park*, and the noun *pocket* gives us the verb *to pocket*. The nouns signifying the principal parts of the body can nearly all be used as verbs. We can head a ball or a pass-list in an examination. We can foot a stocking or foot it along a dusty road, while Shakespeare could make Shylock complain of Antonio that

You foot me like a stranger cur  
Over your threshold.

We can elbow or shoulder our way through a crowd, eye a person with suspicion, and if he cannot stomach being looked at in that way, and objects, we can, if we feel so inclined, cheek him. We can nose around with the object of picking up stray gossip or information, and we can finger some fragile article, thumb a book or warn a person that he must toe the line. We can face danger or face out an imposture, and we can hand a lady into a carriage or hand the porter a tip. There are also the slang expressions *to chin* and *to lip* (=to talk), *to mouth* (to abuse; also to move one's mouth without uttering any sounds) and *to leg up* or *to leg over*.

It is perhaps worth noting as a point of interest that in many cases where the same word exists as both noun and verb, the stress falls on the first syllable in the former and the second syllable in the latter: cf. *im'port* (noun), *im'port* (verb); *per'mit* (noun), *per'mit* (verb); *sub'ject* (noun), *sub'ject* (verb); *con'vert* (noun), *con'vert* (verb); *con'verse* (noun), *con'verse* (verb); *con'tract* (noun); *con'tract* (verb), etc.

Sometimes an adjective comes to have the force of a noun through the omission of the substantive which it originally qualified. Thus when we speak of the principals in a play or a choir we are using *principals* as a noun, but

actually it is all that is left of some such expression as 'the principal performers'. Again, we may speak of an army conducting an offensive, but originally this 'noun' was an adjective in the expression 'an offensive action'. We do not yet speak of conducting a defensive, though we may say that a person is on the defensive, when again, of course, we are giving an adjective the force of a noun. A *submarine* is fairly obviously a shortening of 'a submarine vessel' or 'a submarine boat', while the noun *wireless* was originally the adjectival part of the expression 'wireless telegraphy'. A person who occupies an executive position in a firm is now called *an executive*. The reader will probably be able to compile a fairly extensive list of such words for himself as the result of a little thought. Perhaps the tendency is particularly noticeable at the present day, when, with the rapid pace of life, we want to say a thing as quickly and as briefly as we can, and so we incline to drop out all words that are considered unnecessary; but it is by no means a new method. An illustration from earlier times is to be found in the word *panic*, which, now a noun, was at one time an adjective derived from the name of the god Pan. According to ancient belief, when Pan stamped his foot in anger all the animals of the woods scattered in terror. It was said that a 'Panic fear' had taken possession of them. The subsequent history of the word is fairly obvious.

4. *By the addition of suffixes or prefixes.* This is a very ancient method of word formation, to be found in almost every language. The Anglo-Saxons made fairly extensive use of it, taking a simple root-word (usually a noun or an adjective) and adding a suffix to express a related idea. Some, like *-dom* (kingdom, freedom, etc.), *-ship* (worship, fellowship), and *-th* (length, strength, width) are widely

distributed throughout the language, but are obsolete in so far as they are no longer used to make new words. Those still in use are: *-less* (careless, hatless, moneyless), *-y* (healthy, sticky, stuffy), *-ish* (English, clownish, amateurish), *-ling* (duckling, darling, i.e. 'little dear'), *-ness* (swiftness, bigness, richness), *-ate* (doctorate, episcopate), *-ous* (glorious, furious, porous, perilous), *-ment* (basement, government, sediment), *-ist* and *-ism* (economist, pacifist, pacifism, socialist, socialism), *-ette* (suffragette, cigarette, i.e. a small cigar). It will be noticed that many of these 'living' suffixes are of French origin, though by analogy they are often attached to Saxon roots. The most frequently used of all at the present time is probably *-ee*, from the French past participle termination *é*. *Employee* (one who is employed) and *nominee* (one who is nominated) are two of the earlier examples, but others are being made almost daily, and not always with strict regard to the grammatical significance of the termination. Thus we have *referee*, *refugee*, *evacuee*, *internee*, *examinee*, *consignee*, *payee*, *drawee*, *devotee*, etc. Another very common suffix in modern English is the verbal ending *-en*, subjoined, as in *lengthen*, *fasten*, *shorten*, etc., to an adjective or a noun. This method of verb formation was not extensively employed until after 1500, a fact which is not really surprising when we consider that its purpose is to express something of an abstract idea, and that therefore the necessity for some such device would be felt in post- rather than in pre-Renaissance days.

In the English of the last hundred years prefixes have been employed much more extensively than suffixes, and most of them come from the Latin, as *ambi-*, *ante-*, *pre-*, *post-*, *ex-*, *con-*, *ab-*, *per-*, *inter-*, *extra-*, *super-*, *sub-*, *circum-*, etc. About the only native prefix still extant and in common use is *un-*; the intensive *for-*, which at one time was

attached to a fairly large number of words, has now disappeared almost completely, surviving only in a few cases like *forlorn* (=completely lost), *forbid*, *forgave*, *forget*, *forgo*, the last of which sometimes appears as *forego*, a mis-spelling due to confusion, false etymology or mistaken analogy.

The extent to which words can be multiplied by the addition of a prefix to a basic root is almost unlimited. Thus from the simple Latin root *vert-* (to turn), we get *convert*, *pervert*, *retrovert*, *controvert*, *introvert*, *extrovert*, *invert*, *revert*, *advert*, *subvert*, *divert*, etc. Here, obviously, is a source of great enrichment for the language, though it is to be noted that many of the words so formed are part of the academic and learned vocabulary rather than that of everyday speech; and the reason is not far to seek. They are made by the scholar, not by the man in the street. In course of time some of them become popularised, but others remain somewhat pedantic so far as spoken English is concerned. They are part of our passive rather than our active vocabulary.

A study of the affixes used by any particular age can, to some extent, throw light upon its general character and temperament. Thus the nineteenth century, which had little originality but delighted in imitation and worship of the great, whether great men, great institutions or great artistic styles, was very fond of the ending *-esque* (picturesque, statuesque, Romanesque, etc.), while the various *-isms* of our own age reflect its obsession with theory and doctrine, just as the prevalence of the prefix *inter-* (international, inter-denominational, inter-racial, etc.) indicates a tendency to overleap, intellectually, narrowing boundaries and look towards wider horizons.

5. *By Abbreviation.* At precisely what stage of its history an abbreviation becomes recognised as a word, it is not

easy to say; presumably when the full form ceases to be used in ordinary writing and speech, save perhaps by pedants and precisians. Thus *exam*, though good colloquial English, has not yet received literary recognition. The full form, *examination*, is still frequently heard in speech and would almost always be used in writing, though in another generation it may perhaps be considered pedantic. The same is true of *lab.* as a shortened form of *laboratory* and of *maths.* for *mathematics*. But *zoo* is by now accepted as good English (no one would speak of going to the zoological gardens) and the term *Nazi* has become almost universally recognised as a substitute for the more cumbersome combination National Socialist. *Bus*, similarly, has superseded *omnibus* in all but official documents and notices, while *photo*, *bike* and *pram* are at least good conversational English if they have not yet been adopted into the literary vocabulary. The last of these, it may be mentioned in passing, is an example not only of abbreviation but of syncopation as well (see below). *Perambulator* (from the Latin verb *perambulare*=to walk about) is syncopated to *prambulator*, which then becomes shortened to *pram*. It is not often that both processes are found in the same word. At one period, when tricycles were in vogue, the term *trike* was frequently heard applied to them, on the analogy of *bike*; but this, of course, is now obsolete, having gone out of use, along with the machines themselves, at the end of the Edwardian or the beginning of the Georgian period.

In the cases cited so far the abbreviation has taken place recently enough for the original full form to be remembered and sometimes used. We all, therefore, realise that they are abbreviations, even if we write them without the conventional full-stop or apostrophe. But there are a number of words employed in everyday speech which the

average person never regards as anything but 'good old English words', and which he would be surprised to learn are also all that is left of longer and more cumbersome forms. *Mob*, for instance, is a shortening of the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus* (literally 'the fickle crowd'), *cab* comes from the French *cabriolet*, and *taxi* (earlier, *taxi-cab*) from *taximeter-cabriolet*, a term applied to the type of public vehicle which carried a meter to record the 'tax' or fare, as distinct from the omnibus or tramcar,<sup>1</sup> where the passenger purchased a ticket in advance. The colloquial *chap* is an early eighteenth-century abbreviation of *chapman* (a dealer), *miss* comes from *mistress* and *hussy* from *housewife*; *hack* is a shortened form of *hackney*, *wig* was originally *periwig*, while the term *consols* is contracted from the formula *Consolidated Annuities*. *Fan* (a football fan, etc.) is clearly all that is left of *fanatic*; *piano* is short for *pianoforte*, *curio* for *curiosity*, and *cinema* for *cinematograph*. Then there are also the names of various wines and spirituous drinks. Mr. Stuart Robertson, in his book, *The Development of Modern English* (1936), points out that *gin*, *brandy*, *rum*, *whisky*, *grog*, and *hock* are all abbreviations,<sup>2</sup> while *port* takes its name from the town of Oporto.

Another type of abbreviation is that by which a rather lengthy and cumbersome Latin phrase is clipped down

<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes stated by would-be etymologists that the word *tram* itself is an abbreviation of the surname *Outram*, and that it was originally applied to a truck, running on rails, and invented by a person of that name for use in coal mines. Two facts, however, disprove this: viz. (i) it is usually the stressed, not the unstressed syllable that is preserved when a word is abbreviated. (ii) The word *tram* is found in Middle English and signifies a beam of wood. There are also cognate words in other Germanic languages, with a similar meaning.

<sup>2</sup> The full forms are *genièvre*, *brandywine*, *rumbullion*, *usquebaugh*, *program*, and *hockamore*.



until only the one or two significant words remain. In official or legal language, no doubt, these are fairly numerous; only a few of them, however, have become part of our current vocabulary. One is *quorum*. This is actually the genitive plural of the Latin relative pronoun, and means 'of whom'. It was the initial word of the instructions at one time issued to justices of the peace, specifying the minimum number of whom the court must consist before its proceedings could be considered valid. Hence its application today to committees, councils and similar bodies. *Affidavit* (he has sworn) was the formal way of beginning an oath; *subpoena* (under the penalty) is taken from the wording of a charge to a witness to attend the court under a specified penalty for failing to do so; *decree nisi* (*nisi*=unless) indicates that after the lapse of a certain time the decree will be made absolute unless cause to the contrary be shown; *veto* (I forbid) is the opening of the Latin formula by which a monarch forbids an act of one of his ministers or of the legislative body; and *status quo*, a phrase in frequent use nowadays, is contracted from *status quo ante bellum* (the state existing before war). Certain prayers, likewise, are known by the opening words of the Latin version. Thus we have *paternoster* (Our Father), *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary), *Nunc Dimittis* (Now lettest thou [thy servant] depart), and *Magnificat* ([My soul] doth magnify).

Each section of the community, of course, has its own abbreviations, which constitute a kind of jargon. The student goes to the *varsity*, studies under a *prof.*, takes an *exam.* and then enjoys a *vac.* The sportsman speaks of a *pro.* and a *ref.*, of *soccer* and *rugger*, the doctor of *dip* (diphtheria) and T.B. (tuberculosis), the concertgoer of the *proms.* and the broadcaster of the *mike*. A young lady has her hair *permed*, the housewife *vacs* her carpets, and the

soldier is *demobbed*. The young man striving to gain qualifications for advancement in his profession must obtain a *certif.* or a *dip.*, while the schoolboy contributes to his *mag.* and does his *prep.* in *chemmy* and *geog.* One or two abbreviations of this kind may attain a more or less general currency and come to be accepted as complete words (*soccer* and *rugger* are well on the way to it), but the majority are likely to remain merely part of a class-jargon.

A full list of words which are actually clipped or shortened forms would occupy many pages. The tendency to abbreviate is a natural, an old and a universal one, and it has always been opposed by purists, who have felt that it was a sign of degeneracy. As long ago as the year 1710, in *The Tatler*, Number 230, Swift complained of the contemporary fashion for contracting words and objected, particularly to *mob* and *banter*; but as the subsequent history of our language shows, his objections were of little avail.

6. *By Syncoption.* The word *pram* has already been quoted as an example of this process, whereby a vowel is elided and the consonants on either side of it are run together, with the result that a syllable is lost. Other examples are *once*, *else*, *hence*, which originally were *ones*, *elles*, *henes*, all pronounced as disyllables. Past participles like *born*, *shorn*, *worn*, *forlorn* are likewise the result of syncoption, since all at one time had the termination *-en*.

7. *By Telescoping.* This process is something akin to the previous one, but here two words are combined into one. The verbs *to don* and *to doff*, for instance, are the results of the telescoping of *do on* and *do off* (i.e. to put on and put off) respectively, while the expression 'to dout a fire' (fairly common in southern Yorkshire and Cheshire) is likewise a telescoped form of *do out*. Similarly with the verb *to atone*, though in this case a process known as 'back-forma-

tion' is also involved (see p 126). The earliest example of the expression quoted by the Oxford Dictionary is *at one* (two words), used adverbially and dated 1300. By 1557 telescoping had taken place and the single word *atone* had resulted, though it was still adverbial in force. The earliest known example of the verbal use is from Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1593):

Since we cannot atone you, we shall see  
Justice design the victor's chivalry,

where it obviously has the meaning *set at one* or *reconcile*. Notice that here it was used transitively. The intransitive form, *to atone for one's sins* was a later development. More recent examples of telescoping are *pinafore* and *overall*.

8. *By Metanalysis*. Closely akin, again, to telescoping is the process known to students of language as metanalysis; i.e. re-analysis or different analysis (from the Greek). We all know how, in slovenly pronunciation, the phrase *at home* becomes *a tome*, or how *a flashing eye* becomes *a flashing guy*, *science and arts* becomes *science and darts*, etc. The consonant at the end of one word has become attached to the vowel at the beginning of the next, and so by 're-analysis' a new combination is formed. A relative of the present writer once had a domestic servant who would insist on calling eggs *neggs* (probably by metanalysis of some such phrase as *ten eggs*, *a dozen eggs*, etc.); and a friend's milkman was frequently a source of amusement because his observation that it was a damp, foggy morning invariably came out as 'a damn foggy morning'. Certain words which have long been in use in normal, standard English came into existence in this manner. For example, many people today enjoy (or suffer from?) a nickname; but until the middle of the fifteenth century they would have

had an *ickname* The first syllable, *ick-*, is a variant of the old word *eke*, meaning *also*. An *ickname*, that is to say, was an 'also-name,' i.e. one which was bestowed upon a person in addition to his real one. But in the course of years the final *n* of *an* became attached to the beginning of the next word, and so was evolved the modern term. Similarly *a newt* (1420)<sup>1</sup> was at one time *an ewt*, and the modern adjective *tawdry* (1548) is derived, by the same method, from St. Audrey, the patron saint of finery, at whose fair on October 17th of each year a vast amount of lace and trinketry was sold, much of it, no doubt, of inferior quality.

Sometimes the process works the other way, and the article steals an *n* from the noun that follows it. Thus *an auger* (1594) is derived from the earlier form *a nauger*. Today, if we play cricket, we must defer to the umpire; but prior to 1480 or thereabouts it would have been *a numpire*, an anglicised form of the French *non pair* (unequalled or supreme). So also *an adder* (1377) was originally *a nadder*, *an apron* (1535) *a napron*,<sup>2</sup> and *an orange* (early thirteenth century) *a norange*. In the case of this last word the final *n*, though lost long since in most European languages, is still retained in Spanish (*naranja*), Serbian (*naranča*), Hungarian (*narancs*), and, as might be expected, Persian (*nārān*), and Hindustani (*narangi*). The ultimate source of the term, as noticed on page 87, is Arabic.

9. *Portmanteau Words*. When part of one word is com-

<sup>1</sup> The dates given in brackets after these words indicate the earliest example quoted by *N. E. D.*

<sup>2</sup> Also an example of syncopation, since it comes from an earlier form *naperon*. The first syllable means 'cloth' (from the French) and is found again in the word *napkin* (i.e. a little cloth), today termed more affectedly a *serviette*.

bined with part of another in order to form a new word, carrying with it the ideas behind both the original terms, we have what is known as a 'portmanteau word'. For instance, when he wished to find a name for that part of humanity in his day who considered themselves socially superior because they possessed a gig, Carlyle coined the term *gigmanty*; and to suggest the idea of galloping in triumph, Lewis Carroll invented the verb *to galumph*. The first of these, of course, became obsolete when the gig went out of fashion, and the second was never seriously adopted into the language. But a certain number of words which are now part of our normal vocabulary originated in this way. *Tragi-comedy*, for instance, is quite clearly the result of the combination of *tragedy* and *comedy*, while *melodrama* comes from *melody* and *drama*, for the early nineteenth-century 'blood and thunder' play usually had song and music plentifully interspersed in it. *Lunch* is said to have originated in a combination of *lump* and *hunch*; and at one time Messrs. Lyons' Corner Houses had on their menu a dish known as *brunch*, explained (I believe it is by Walter de la Mare, in one of his prose essays) as being a portmanteau form of breakfast and lunch. The section of the London Underground Railway known as the Bakerloo Line obtained its name from a combination of Baker Street and Waterloo, and then there is *radiogram*, from radio-set and gramophone, and *electrocute*, from *electric* and *execute*. Amongst other attempts at making portmanteau words of this kind are to be found *macon*, the proposed name for the 'mutton bacon' which was tried out, unsuccessfully, as a wartime substitute in the early months of 1940, and *navi-cert* (navigation certificate), a permit granted about the same time to foreign vessels to avoid search under the British contraband control. The word *comintern* is, too, a

portmanteau form of *communist international* and *smog* comes from *smoke* and *fog*.

10. *Words manufactured from Initials.* In certain cases initials have become more commonly used than the actual words for which they stand, so that they can almost be regarded as words in themselves. Thus we usually speak of a B.A. or an M.A. rather than a Bachelor of Arts or a Master of Arts, and a Q.C., an M.P., a J.P., an I.O.U., etc. Everyone knows what we mean by the C.I.D., and none but the very pedantic would ever think of abandoning these initials in favour of the words for which they stand (even if they knew them, which the majority probably do not). And it is the same with W.V.S., R.A.M.C., B.B.C., G.P.O., etc.

In all these cases and in many others the initials have remained distinct and are still recognisable as such. But in some cases, where it has been possible, they have actually been combined to form a word. Thus in the war of 1939-45 the pipe-line laid beneath the English Channel to supply oil to the armies in France was known as Pluto, from the initials P.L.U.T.O. (Pipe Line Under the Ocean), while the W.R.N.S. (Women's Royal Naval Service) was popularly referred to as 'the Wrens'. A singular (Wren) was even formed to denote an individual member of the service. *Gestapo*, the name given to the secret police in Nazi Germany, was made up by combining the beginnings of the three words which formed their official designation—*Geheime Staats Polizei*—and the *Ogpu*, the Russian counterpart, received its name in the same way. *Hoax* comes from *hocus-pocus*, while *uncompoop* may possibly have been formed, by combination and corruption, from the Latin *non compos mentis* (not of sound mind). Other examples are *Unesco* and *NATO*.

11. *Back-Formation*. Another means by which new words have come into being is through the process known as 'back-formation'. Most back-formations are the result of a misunderstanding, though a few have been deliberate. The principle, and the way in which it works, can best be explained by taking actual examples. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there was an adverb *grovelling*, meaning 'in abject manner, on the ground'. Thus one could say, 'He lay grovelling in the dust', where the word would be an adverb of manner. But then the termination *-ing* was mistaken for the sign of the present participle, and this erroneous idea received encouragement from the fact that in most contexts where the word occurred a present participle would certainly make sense. Having, then, transformed the adverb to a participle, the next step was to work back from this to an infinitive *to grovel*, and so, through a totally mistaken idea, a new verb was added to the English language.

In the same way the verb *to sidle* is a back-formation from the adverb *sidling*, and the nouns *beggar*, *pedlar*, *hawker* and *editor* have given us the corresponding verbs *to beg*, *to peddle*, *to hawk* and *to edit*. Most agent-nouns are formed from a verb by the addition of *-er* or *-or*, but here the process has worked in the opposite direction. An early nineteenth-century farce, *Raising the Wind*, by James Kenney, had in it a notorious cheat by the name of Jeremy Diddler, and it was not long before his name also gave rise to a new word—the verb *to diddle*. Or to come rather nearer to the present day, at the beginning of the twentieth century there was in very common use a verb *to maffick*, signifying to go wild with joy. Its origin is traceable to the wild scenes of rejoicing that took place in London to celebrate the relief of Mafeking during the Boer

War. Mafeking, a proper name, becomes a present participle, and so gives rise to a corresponding verb. Again, the noun *pea* never appeared in the English language until the last few years of the sixteenth century, before that time one always spoke of a *pease*, but after a while this was felt to be a plural and a new singular was coined. *Cherry*, similarly, is a false singular from the older *cheris* (Fr. *cerise*). From *resurrection* a verb *to resurrect* has been formed, in defiance of all laws of etymology, *conscript* has given us a verb *to conscript*, though actually we should say *conscribe* (cf. *inscription*, *inscribe*, *subscription*, *subscribe*, etc.), and from *television* there has recently appeared a verb *to televise*. Into this class of spurious derivatives also fall *to peeve* (from *peevis*), *to audit* (from *auditor*), *to donate* (from *donation*), *to burgle* (from *burglar*), *gloom* (from *gloomy*) and *greed* (from *greedy*). One of the latest examples is the American *enthuse*, from *enthusiast*, *enthusiasm*, etc., but this has not yet been accepted into English.

Needless to say, a number of writers have used this device of back-formation for humorous effect. Thus G. K. Chesterton once wrote

The wicked grocer groces,

and J. K. Stephen, a delightful parodist, looked forward to the day when

The Rudyards cease from kipling,  
And the Haggards ride no more.

But none of these are likely to attain permanency.

12. *Corruption or Misunderstanding*. Anyone who has heard a person ignorant of foreign languages attempting to pronounce some French or German tag will readily appreciate the way in which the mangling and corruption of such phra-



ses may occasionally be responsible for bringing a new word into the language. Soldiers returning from France during the war of 1914–1918 had a whole repertoire of these terms. *S'il vous plait* became *civil play*; *ça ne fait rien* was rendered *san fairy Anne*; and *il n'y en a plus* gave the anglicised though rather incomprehensible *na-poo*.<sup>1</sup> Those who had been in India picked up the native word for *tea*, (*cha*) and corrupted it to *char*. Nor are examples lacking from literature. Most of us will recall the Dickensian character who persisted in speaking of Bully Ruffian (Bellerophon), or the motto of Mrs Micawber's papa, *experientia does it* (actually the Latin *experientia docet*, i.e. experience teaches). Foreign terms and phrases are, naturally, most liable to be thus corrupted and mispronounced, but occasionally the more difficult and less familiar English words suffer the same fate, as witness the vulgar 'sparrowgrass' for asparagus. The majority of such corruptions or misunderstandings have remained slang and have enjoyed but a brief period of currency (most of those which resulted from the 1914–18 War are already forgotten); but a few, like *camouflage*, have remained. No doubt many of us have often wondered why a jew's-harp is so named and what connexion it has with the Hebrews. The puzzle has never yet been solved, but if only we knew the true history of the term we should probably find that there was no connexion at all, and that it was a popular distortion of some other construction. The word *Whitsun* is certainly a corruption of this kind. Whit Sunday, as it originally was, signified 'White Sunday,' because on that

<sup>1</sup> A fairly extensive list of these is given in a little booklet *The Soldier's War Slang Dictionary* (T. Werner Laurie, 1939), though some of the phrases here attributed to the Great War were in use before. A more ambitious and more authoritative work is *Songs and Slang of the British Soldier, 1914–1918*, by Eric Partridge and John Brophy (1930).

day, in the primitive Christian Church, all the converts wore white robes, as a symbol of purification. But by metanalysis Whit Sunday was transformed to Whitsun Day, and then, on the analogy of this, there came at a later date, *Whitsun Week*, *Whitsuntide*, *Whitsun Sunday* and (actually contradiction in terms) *Whitsun Monday*! Several of our commoner exclamations have also originated in a mangling or corruption of a longer and more involved phrase, sometimes for mere convenience, sometimes from reverential motives. Thus *goodbye*, the most frequent salutation used between friends at parting, is a garbled form of 'God be with ye', *drat it* is a euphemism for 'God rot it', just as *blimey* (still a vulgarism) is contracted from 'May God blind me', and the profane *bloody* was once said to have originated in the expression 'By Our Lady', but this is no longer accepted, most authorities preferring to take it at its face value. Incidentally to clear up what might well become a matter of dispute, it may be stated that when we exclaim 'Great Scott!' we are not apostrophising Sir Walter, but merely using an American euphemism for 'Great God!'. The Scott in question is supposed to have been General Winfield Scott, a one-time candidate for the Presidency. *Jeopardy*, likewise, is a corruption of the French *jeu parti* (an evenly matched game), hence by a metaphorical application a situation fraught with risk, where it is a 'toss up' whether one wins or loses. Chaucer has it as *jupartie*. The word should, of course, actually refer to the position which gives rise to the risk or danger, but, again by modification, it has come to denote the more abstract idea of the risk itself. And there is also the peculiar Elizabethan word *kickshaws*.

Art thou good at these kickshawses, knight?

inquires Sir Toby Belch of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, in reference to the latter's reputation as a dancer. In this particular context it is possible that a pun on *kick* is intended, but etymologically there is no connexion between the two words. *Kickshaws* is nothing more nor less than the French *quelquechose*. No doubt even in Sir Toby's time it was half slang, and on a par with the modern *thingummy*.

13 *False Etymology*. There are a certain number of words in the English language which have attained their present forms or their present-day usage, through mistaken notions regarding their etymology. One instance of such a word has already been given in *island* (p. 105); another is *posthumous*, which, originally spelt without the *h*, meant 'coming after in order of time'. But by a mistake of etymology the second half of the word, *-humous*, was assumed to be connected with death and burial, and so the meaning 'after death' developed. Or turn to the Book of Genesis, and in the second chapter, verse 18, we read; 'And the Lord said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him"' It is quite obvious from the context that *meet* is an adjective, signifying *fitting* or *suitable*. But since the 'help' was also a companion to man, and since she became his mate or wife, the idea arose that a 'help meet' was a mate who helped, and thus there came into being the word *helpmate*, now perfectly good English. Or take another instance. At one time a vessel to hold salt was named a *saler* (from the Latin *sal* = salt); then, quite unnecessarily, it was called a salt-saler; and finally a *salt-saler* became a *salt-cellar*, though why the change should have taken place it is difficult to see. Possibly this, as well as the previous word, is an early example of what, since the time of Sheridan, has come to be

called malapropism. Clearer is the case of *could*, the past tense of the verb *to be able*. Historically there should be no *l* in it. It has been inserted on analogy with the verbs *should* and *would*, where, of course, there is historical justification for it.

14. *Slang terms, with the lapse of time, come to be accepted into the literary vocabulary as 'good English'*. The reflection that many words which today are no longer regarded as vulgar or low, and are even indispensable if we are to express ourselves fluently and with ease, were at one time outside the pale of the literary or 'polite' language, must be a matter of great consolation to those who are not quite sure whether a particular term is permissible or whether it is still to be branded as slang. The very word *slang* itself is a comparative newcomer, of obscure and none too respectable origin. It seems only to have come into general use about 1756. Before that time the type of language which we now call slang was designated *cant*, and was employed mainly by thieves, smugglers and the underworld generally. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century it was ignored by lexicographers and students of language alike, but from the opening of Queen Anne's reign, for the next three-quarters of a century, there was an awakening of interest in low life (as it was then called),<sup>1</sup> and a number of dictionaries of slang were published, the chief of them being *A Dictionary of the Canting Crew* (1700), *A New Canting Dictionary* (1725) and (the most important of them all) Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In literature it can be seen in the increasing prominence given to the life of the underworld by novelists like Defoe and Fielding, while on the stage it is represented by Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728).

<sup>2</sup> This last has recently been reprinted and edited by Mr. Eric Partridge, who has himself done much valuable research upon contemporary slang.

To the student of language these works are invaluable, for a perusal of them will reveal the origin of a number of words which today are perfectly good and respectable English. In 1725, for instance, we find that the following words, amongst others, were slang: *bet* (a wager),<sup>1</sup> *cove* (man, fellow, rogue), *chap* (a dealer in stolen goods), *fun* (a slippery trick), *jilt* (a tricking woman), *pinch* (to steal), *prig* (a thief or cheat), *shabby* (in poor or sorry rig), *trip* (a short voyage). From Grose we get the following: *adrift* (loose, discharged), *balderdash* (adulterated wine), *blackguard* (a shabby, dirty fellow), *blackleg* (a gambler or sharper on the turf), *coax* (to fondle or wheedle), *luck* (to beat), *pommel* (to beat), *pluck* (courage), *scamp* (highwayman), *scapegrace* (a wild, dissolute fellow), *smile* (smile), *taken in* (imposed on). *Kidnap* was also a cant term at this time, though its application was restricted to the practice which the word literally suggests, i.e. 'kidnabbing' or child-stealing, then a very lucrative trade. Most of these it will be noticed, are still in the language today. Some, it is true, remain slang, but others have become respectable literary terms, though often with a slight change of meaning. Of particular interest are the words *donkey*, which first occurs in Grose as a slang expression but has now completely ousted the older and more correct *ass*, and the verb *to coax*, which, firmly established today, gave particular offence to Dr. Johnson, who described it as a 'low word'.

Precisely when a word ceases to be slang and becomes 'good English' it is difficult to say; presumably when it begins to be used by representative writers and finds its way into the speech of normally educated people or is used on more or less formal occasions without appearing

<sup>1</sup> The words in brackets are the contemporary definition.

in any way incongruous. For slang is mainly the creation of those who despise or disregard convention and hanker after novelty of expression in the belief that it shows independence and originality: that is to say, the very young, the very low or the very high. Tradition and what we call 'the genius of the language' are, on the whole, conservatively inclined, and many a word has probably been current in popular speech for some years before the more fastidious academic mind consents to recognise it; but that the process is not always a long one is shown by the fact that in 1912 no less a person than Logan Pearsall Smith could write, somewhat apprehensively, of 'words like *rowdy*, *bogus*, *boom* and *rollicking*, at which we boggle'. Today none of us would boggle at any of these words. In less than a generation they have changed from terms of doubtful character to words of respectable standing. Possibly many others which now are regarded as slang or, at best, Americanisms, in twenty-five or thirty years' time will find their way into the vocabulary of the most 'correct' authors and the most fastidious speakers.

15. *Words derived from Proper or Personal Names.* Even excluding scientific and technical terms, where such formations abound, a long list could be compiled of words in the English language which are derived from proper or personal names.<sup>1</sup> Mrs Grundy, the symbol of prudish, strait-laced public opinion, first came into being in Thomas Morton's comedy *Speed the Plough* (1800). She never actually appears on the stage but is constantly mentioned and all the characters live in dread of what Mrs. Grundy will say of their conduct. Thomas More gave us *Utopia* and the adject-

<sup>1</sup> For a full treatment of the subject Professor Ernest Weekley's *Words and Names* (1932), and Eric Partridge's *Name into Word. Proper Names that have Become Common Property* (1949) should be consulted.

tive *Utopian* as a derivative, while from Swift came *Lilliput* and *Lilliputian*. *Gamp*, as a synonym for umbrella, is, of course, a legacy of Dickens' well-known character Mrs. Gamp; and the same writer is responsible for *Bumbledom*, a *Wellerism* and a *Pickwickian sense*, though it is noticeable that all these are falling into disuse now that Dickens is no longer the popular author that he was a generation ago. Garments particularly seem to have borrowed the name of those who first wore them or introduced them to the public. Thus we have Norfolk jackets, mackintoshes, cardigans, wellingtons, bloomers, and bowlers, the last mentioned being named after a certain Mr. Bowler of St. Swithin's Lane in London, who announced in the *Daily News* of August 8th, 1868, that he had invented and had on sale 'a new hat that is completely ventilated, whilst at the same time the head is relieved of the pressure experienced in wearing hats of the ordinary description.' *Trilby* takes us back to George du Maurier and *tam o' shanter* to Burns. The adjective *namby-pamby* originated as a nickname bestowed upon the writer Ambrose Phillips by a fellow-poet of the early eighteenth century, Henry Carey, in virtue of his childish verse, while sandwiches took their name from one of the Earls of Sandwich, who first introduced them as a convenient form of refreshment for his card parties; and the dahlia perpetuates the name of the Swedish botanist Dahl, by whom it was first cultivated. *Gin* is an abbreviation of *Geneva* (itself a corruption of the French *genèvre*) and *pants* of *pantaloons*, so called because they were originally associated with that character in the old pantomimes. Samuel Plimsoll, the *saffor's* friend, has given his name to the plimsoll line on ships and also to a type of rubber-soled shoes; *the teddy bear* is so called after Theodore Roosevelt; the Pullman coach on the railway is named after an American

engineer, a guv, as most people will realise, is called after the notorious Guy Fawkes of gunpowder fame, and Lord Brougham bequeathed his name to a type of horse-drawn carriage, now obsolete but well known to our grandparents, just as that of Mr. Hansom, who otherwise would have been quite undistinguished and unknown to posterity, has been remembered because of the famous cabs that plied the streets of London in the latter part of the last century.

To a few words thus derived from personal names special interest attaches. A derrick (a kind of crane or hoisting apparatus) takes its name from a well-known hangman of the day of Queen Elizabeth I, and was probably so called in the first instance in sport, while the verb *to lynch* and the term *lynch law* come from Judge Lynch of the United States, who, round about 1780, dispensed justice in a somewhat summary and arbitrary fashion. Evidently his practices gained notoriety far and wide, for there are corresponding verbs in French, German and Italian, to name only three other languages. Then there is the verb *to boycott*. The history of this is probably better known than that of most words in the language. Captain Boycott was agent for the Irish estates of a certain English peer about the year 1880. He became so unpopular on account of his harsh treatment of the tenants that an organised strike was planned against him, and by a kind of passive persecution the aggrieved Irish finally obtained his removal. This mode of treatment became known as a boycott, after the person upon whom it was first successfully practised, and soon afterwards the verb *to boycott* was coined. In *sadism* and *sadist* is perpetuated the evil reputation of the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), who combined sexual perversion with a lust for cruelty. Tommy Atkins (often nowadays shortened to *tommy*) as a name for the British soldier, was first popu-



larised by Rudyard Kipling in his *Barrack-Room Ballads*, but it goes back to a date considerably earlier than that. In 1815 the War Office issued to all soldiers a circular which was to be filled up with particulars of their name, age, rank, etc. As the private soldier of those days was at best semi-literate, it was deemed advisable to send out also a specimen form, duly completed, for the men's guidance. For the name of the imaginary soldier THOMAS ATKINS was inserted, and from that time on Tommy Atkins became a stock name for the British private.

A number of words of this type are still unexplained and will probably always remain so. Who, for instance, was the first jerry-builder and who the original nosey parker? What is the identity of the proverbial Jack Robinson, and after whom is the sweet william named? Why is cheese on toast called a Welsh rabbit, and who was the Toby who gave his name to the jug? No doubt ingenious explanations could be found for all of these, but before accepting them we should be very sure of the grounds on which they are based.

Three fairly recent words to be derived from personal names are probably *belisha-beacon* (from Mr Hore-Belisha, who introduced them in 1934, when he was Minister of Transport), a *quisling* (a person who treacherously intrigues with a foreign power to betray his own country), from the Norwegian Nazi, Major Quisling, who assisted the Germans in their invasion of Norway in 1940, and *biro pen*, from its inventor (1943), Lázlo Biro, a Hungarian refugee living in the Argentine. This last is, strictly speaking, a proprietary trade name, but it has come to be used colloquially for any kind of ball-pointed pen, and a verb *to biro* has even been formed from it.

To certain races and nationalities traditional characteris-

tics have been attached by the popular mind, often without any real justification, and this again offers scope for the coinage of new words. If a person is mean we call him a Jew or a Scotsman, if stupid an Irishman or a Dutchman, if an out and out materialist, with no appreciation of the finer things of life, a Philistine, and if ruthlessly destructive a Vandal. Then from place-names there have been derived numerous words for products with which they are associated or have been associated in the past: calico from Calicut, cambric from Cambrai, millinery from Milan, damask from Damascus, muslin from Mosul. Steenkirk in Flanders gave its name to a fashionable lace cravat, much in vogue in the early eighteenth century, and Bilbao in Spain to the best quality swords in the Elizabethan age. Muscatels take their name from Muscat, port wine from Oporto, and a spa is so called from one of the oldest of Continental watering-places, Spa (or Spau), near Liège in Belgium. In many cases, of course, products are no longer connected with the place after which they are named. Thus brussels sprouts are not peculiar to Brussels, gorgonzola cheese is made elsewhere than in Italy, the cheese counters of many food shops offer us Canadian as well as English cheddar, and worsted has long since lost its connexion with the Norfolk village of that name. As for Jerusalem artichokes, they have never had any connexion whatever with Palestine. The word is a corruption of the Italian *girasole* (sunflower).

16. *Two other words are combined.* This is not quite the same process as syncopation, noticed earlier in the present chapter, in that no syllable is lost. Words like *weekday*, *goldfish*, *blackbird*, *railway*, *bookcase*, *waterproof*, etc. are quite clearly just a combination of two other words, sometimes a noun and an adjective, sometimes a noun preceded by

another noun which is used with something of an adjectival force. Occasionally we find that the two elements are hyphenated e.g. *dug-out*, *lean-to*, *air-raid*. This method of combination is not extensively used nowadays, though in the past it was frequently resorted to and a number of words thus created are no longer recognisable as combinations to the ordinary person. How many, for instance, would realise that *daisy* is really *day's eye*, that *bonfire* was originally *bone-fire*, that *lord* and *lady* come from *hlāford* and *hlāefdige* (guardian and kneader of the bread respectively), that the Anglo-Saxon form of *woman* was *wifman*<sup>1</sup> (i.e. a female person) and that the modern *world* is really a combination of the two words *wer* and *eld* (i.e. the generation of man)? But if these are very ancient examples of combination, others are not of such long standing as we might suppose. *Week-end*, for instance, seems an indispensable word, which must have been in the language for many generations; yet if we are to believe Professor Weekley it goes back no more than about sixty years, and is of Northern origin. 'I had never heard of a week-end,' he writes in *The Romance of Words*, 'until I paid a visit to Lancashire in 1883.'

17. *Conscious and Deliberate Coinages*. When a new invention or discovery is made there not only arises the necessity of finding a name for it, but it brings in its train a whole host of fresh ideas and fresh conceptions, so that a need is soon felt for words to express them. Thus the vocabulary is enlarged by the addition of coinages. There are, of course, various principles underlying the process, but the chief characteristic of a coinage is that an entirely

<sup>1</sup> The loss of an *f* in the course of development from Old to Modern English is to be found in a number of words. Examples are not only *wifman*, but also *hlāford* (lord), *hlāefdige* (lady), and *hēafod* (head).

new word is created, as it were from nowhere. It is not merely a matter of extending the meaning of an existing word or making use of a proper name. Not infrequently we find several attempts made before a term is finally settled on as satisfactory. Thus the earliest name for a bicycle was *velocipede*, and what we now call an aeroplane was at one time known as a flying machine. Most people will agree that the changes have been for the better. But having found a name for the machine itself, there next came the difficulty of finding one for the person who flew it. For some years *aviator* was employed, a rather cumbersome term, obviously from the Latin *avis* (a bird). Then this was replaced by *airman*, which has, apparently, come to stay, though *aviation* is still used as an abstract noun.<sup>1</sup> The invention of wireless likewise gave rise to a number of coinages. There was, for instance, the verb *to listen-in*, appropriate, perhaps, in the old headphone days but now quite obsolete. Then there arose the question of what to call the person who did the listening. At first *listener-in* was adopted, but this was felt to be awkward and unsuitable, so a daily newspaper ran a competition to try to obtain suggestions, and the winning word was *broadcatcher* (on the analogy of the verb *to broadcast*), but happily all attempts to popularise so inelegant and clumsy a term were futile, and today we have accepted the simple word *listener*, which is unlikely to be improved upon.

<sup>1</sup> As a point of interest it may be mentioned that aviation seems to have borrowed extensively from the terminology of the sea. Thus we have *aircraft*, *airship*, *airliner*, *airport*, *aeronautics*, *air-flotilla*, while we speak of the *crew* and the *pilot* of an aeroplane, and the phrase *to bale out*, which has only come into prominence in connexion with aircraft since the outbreak of war in 1939, is almost certainly a transferred sense of the nautical term.

The classical tongues have proved a happy hunting ground for the word-coiner. Scientists and inventors particularly have drawn 'upon them. From the Greek we have *oxygen*, *hydrogen*, *ether*, *logic*, *biology*, *geology*, *geography*, *astrology*, *astronomy*, *photograph*, *phonograph*, *telephone*, *telegram*, *telegraph*, *gramophone*, *telescope*, *microscope*, *microbe*, *automaton*, *bicycle*, etc.; from Latin *radiator*, *propeller*, *manicure*, *sinecure*, *impromptu* and *extempore*. Scientists and inventors are, in general, not linguists, their words are made for convenience and expressiveness, not for euphony, and consequently they have never shown any aversion to hybrids if they served their purpose. Thus in *automobile*, *television* and *dictaphone* we have words which are half Latin and half Greek, and in *mineralogy* a formation from an English root and a Greek suffix. The classical tongues, again, have been laid under liberal requisition as trade names by the vendors of manufactured foods and patent medicines. There are, for instance, *Sanitas* and *Sanatogen*. (Lat. *sanitas*=health), *Virol* (Lat. *vires*=strength), *Bovril* (Lat. *boves*=bullocks), *Glaxo* (Gk. *galaktos*=milk), *Ovaltine* (Lat. *ovum*=egg), *Wincarnis* (Lat. *vinum*=wine; *carnis*=flesh), *Vita-Weat* and *Yeast-Vite* (Lat. *vita*=life), *Optrex* (Gk. *optikos*=eye), and *Phyllosan* (Gk. *phyllassein*=to guard, Lat. *sanitas*=health).

18. *Words taken direct from Foreign Languages* It is a characteristic of English that it has always shown itself ready to borrow from other languages when they can supply a word that fills a gap in the native vocabulary, supplies a need, or is more expressive than a corresponding native term would be. In this respect it stands in direct contrast to German, which has always been very particular about its 'purity' and has insisted on coining a Germanic word wherever possible, even for scientific inventions, in-

stead of adopting the term of international currency. Thus side by side with *Telefon*, the equivalent of which is to be found in most other European languages, German has *Fernsprecher* (literally *far-speaker*). It is true that our own term *loudspeaker* shows a similar tendency, but it is an exceptional instance, and in any case it expresses a different idea from the older *megaphone*.

English has borrowed from practically every language under the sun, but since a separate chapter is devoted to this foreign element later in the book, there is no need to go into details here.

19. *Freak Formations* Under this head might have been included the word *tank* (the military weapon), which is mentioned elsewhere (p. 186). But possibly the best instances are *teetotal* and *tandem*, the former of which is said to have originated from *t-total*, the attempt of a stammering temperance advocate to pronounce the expression *total abstainer*, and the latter from a University witticism. Anyone with a slight knowledge of Latin will not need to be told that in that language *tandem* is a temporal adverb meaning 'at length'. Thus when two horses were placed one in front of the other to draw a vehicle, some humorist named the combination a tandem, as the beasts were 'at length'; and when later the double bicycle appeared this also was called a tandem. *Funny-bone*, again, is a scholastic pun upon the anatomical term *humerus*, and *publican*, which has replaced the older *inn-keeper*, was fairly obviously in the first place a jest upon the name, made familiar by the Bible, of the Roman tax-gatherers, perhaps with an underlying suggestion that the modern publican was also a sinner. Kittredge, discussing the word in the book, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech* (1902) declares that 'the modern sense of "keeper of a public house" has never

become serious.' In America of 1902 (for Kittredge was an American) this may have been true, but it is certainly not true of England in 1941, nor has it been for a number of years. On the contrary it is the only meaning that the average person attaches to the word nowadays.

A few freak terms of this kind have managed to survive and pass into the accepted vocabulary of English, but the majority of such formations are nonce-words (i.e. words coined and used on one occasion only) and are forgotten almost as soon as they are made.

We have now distinguished the nineteen chief ways in which words are formed or added to the language. But, it may be asked, how do these words come to be introduced, what is the motive behind the enlargement or extension of the vocabulary, and what factors determine whether such additions become a permanent part of the language or live for a while only and then become obsolete? In general it may be said that a new word is called forth by a need for it or a consciousness that no existing word is really adequate to fill that need: a new idea or conception is to be expressed, new institutions or new social developments and tendencies have to be described and distinguished; new inventions or newly adopted products, fashions, etc. must be given a name. Whether the new words thus created or added to the vocabulary are permanent depends very largely upon the permanence of the objects or the ideas they are used to describe. For instance, the two words *plump* and *aloof*, which were introduced from Dutch in 1481 and 1532 respectively, have become thoroughly naturalised and an essential part of our vocabulary because they stand for ideas which people will always need to express and

which are unaffected by social, political or economic changes. But the late seventeenth-century term *a trimmer*, in the sense of a political opportunist who trims his sails to any wind, and the early eighteenth-century *a high-flyer*, a rather contemptuous appellation for a High-Churchman, are today dead beyond resuscitation and require a glossary to explain them to anyone but a specialist on the periods in question. When the particular circumstances which gave rise to them had changed, they fell out of use. They had filled a gap, had served their purpose, but now were of service no longer.

Political and social developments, as well as religious controversies, have been the occasion of the introduction of numerous words into the language; and it is not always possible to trace them to any one person, though obviously they must have been employed by one person at first, even if only an anonymous pamphleteer or newspaper-writer, and then 'caught on'. *The Cabinet*, as a term for the Council of Ministers of the Crown, dates from about 1645, *the people*, in its modern sense, from some five years later, both clearly an outcome of the Civil War. *Methodist* and *Methodism*, originally used in derision, go back to the mid-eighteenth century, when the religious revival led by the Wesleys occasioned much throwing about of words. *Wesleyan* does not appear until considerably later. *Unitarian*, with its present-day significance, came into popular use in the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, when dispute waxed strong concerning the nature of the Godhead and the rationality of the doctrine of the Trinity, but it had existed much earlier. It was, in fact, first used in 1672 in a pamphlet by Henry Hedworth; and in 1687 appeared *A Brief History of the Unitarians, Called also Socinians*. But



for the next hundred and fifty years it was employed rather loosely. Thus when Wesley wrote

The Unitarian fiend expel,  
And chase his doctrines back to Hell,

he had in mind Mahomet and his followers, not Unitarian Christians, who at this time were more frequently called Arians, Socinians or sometimes merely Dissenters. *Anglo-Catholic*, as a term to distinguish those members of the 'High' party in the Church of England who refuse to call themselves Protestants, came into use about 1840-41 and the word *disestablishment*, in the ecclesiastical sense of the severance of the Church of England from the State, is first recorded by the Oxford Dictionary in 1860, though the verb *to disestablish* was in use as early as 1838.

In politics the mid-nineteenth century gave us *Liberal* and *Conservative* in place of the older *Whig* and *Tory*, though the last-mentioned is still sometimes applied to the Conservative Party by its opponents in a spirit of contempt or ridicule; and even the Conservatives themselves are beginning to use it again, but with the opposite colouring. The expression, *the middle class*, dates from 1812, and though it was at one time a term of the greatest respectability, nowadays to describe anything as 'middle-class' is to imply depreciation of it. The earliest recorded use of *socialism* is in 1835, of *communism* in 1840 and of *capitalism* in 1854, though Arthur Young had written of a capitalist in 1792, over half a century earlier. *Free trade* made its appearance in 1823, *tariff*<sup>1</sup> in 1816 and *protection* (in

<sup>1</sup> I.e. as a noun, equivalent to *import duty*. The original sense, which is much older, was 'a list of charges'. The term, as employed today, is a shortened form of 'tariff duty', i.e. one of a number of duties included in an official list. The older sense is still preserved in the tariff issued by a hotel or restaurant.

the sense of a system of duties on foreign goods to protect the home market) in 1828.

But though the parentage of most words is now lost in the mists of obscurity, it is possible to assign some to definite individuals. And here one remark must be made. It is not always the best writers whose coinages become part of the permanent vocabulary of a language. Rather is it the most popular, the most read or the most widely quoted. Not that they are necessarily popular or widely read now. When a word has once been adopted as part of current speech the creator of it may be completely forgotten and his writings fall into neglect, yet the word will continue to survive so long as there is a use for it. But they must have been well known at one time. This being the case, it is not surprising to find that the Authorised Version of the Bible is responsible for the introduction of a considerable number of words, for though it is largely neglected today, for three hundred years it was the book of the people and even the illiterate were familiar with it through hearing it read in church Sunday by Sunday. Elsewhere we have made mention of a few examples;<sup>1</sup> others are *peacemaker*, *loving-kindness*, *long-suffering*, as well as metaphorical phrases like *to kill the fatted calf*, *to cast pearls before swine*, etc. But these are matter for a subsequent chapter.

Many words and expressions, too, we owe to Shakespeare. To take only a few from an extensive list, we have *incarnadine*, *multitudinous*, *dauntless*, *dwindle*, *to foot* (=to kick), *sick of* (=tired of), *lack-lustre* (dull), *the seamy side*, and, from *Twelfth Night*, the verb *to accost* in the sense of going boldly and rather rudely up to a person. Then there are also the phrases *the sere and yellow leaf*, *the dogs of war*, *hoist with*

<sup>1</sup> See page 92.

*his own petard*, *patience on a monument*, etc. Every one of these may not have been coined by Shakespeare, but he certainly gave them currency and so was responsible for-perpetuating them. We might almost say that they have become household words, and once again we should be quoting from his own works.

Shakespeare's contemporary Spenser has given us *elfin* and the adjective *blatant*; and from Milton come *irresponsible*, a *dim religious light* and *pandemonium*, a hybrid word made up from the Greek *pan* (all) and the pseudo-Latin *demonium* (devil-land). Milton coined it as a name for the conference hall of all the devils (in *Paradise Lost*), but as the devils were continually quarrelling amongst themselves, so that Pandemonium was full of noise and tumult, the idea of confusion superseded that originally attaching to the word. Swift must be given credit for the useful adjective *lilliputian*, as Sir Thomas More must for *Utopian*, and from that classic creation of Sheridan, Mrs. Malaprop, we get the term *malapropism*, while the late eighteenth-century dramatist, Thomas Morton, as we have seen, gave us Mrs. Grundy. To Edmund Burke are attributed a number of political terms, e.g. *electioneering*, *representation*, *municipality*, *financial*, *diplomacy*, *colonial*, as well as the phrase *the great unwashed*, while from Burke's successor of a century later, Benjamin Disraeli, comes the famous *a leap in the dark*. Macaulay coined *constituency*, Huxley *agnostic*, and Carlyle, besides the famous *gigmanity*, was responsible for the noun *outcome*, a literal rendering of the Latin *event*, which had previously been used in that sense but has since come to mean merely *occurrence*. To Coleridge we owe *pessimism*, to Shelley *idealism* and to Tennyson *fairy tale*, a word which one might have thought went back much farther. The now familiar *raid*, too, is of comparatively re-

cent origin, having been introduced by Sir Walter Scott. In its original sense it was cognate with the verb *to ride*, and signified a sudden onslaught or foray, usually by a band of brigands or a predatory army. There was, that is to say, a definite sense of lawlessness about it. But this meaning has long since been lost, so that today we can speak of the police raiding the headquarters of a criminal organisation in order to enforce the law. The term *air-raid*, another development from the same root, was coined during the war of 1914-1918. In B.B.C. news-bulletins during the second World War it was shortened again to the simple *raid* ('a raid occurred last night on a town on the East Coast, etc.') and it is almost certain that to the average civilian mind today the word conveys the meaning of 'an attack from the air' rather than its original one, except when it is employed metaphorically, as when we speak of 'raiding the larder' for food, or of youths 'raiding an orchard'.

Amongst modern writers Bernard Shaw has contributed the term *the Life Force* (a translation of Henri Bergson's *élan vital*) and Aldous Huxley *non-attachment*, first found in his book *Ends and Means*. *The white man's burden* comes from Kipling, and *The Never-Never Land* was created by Sir James Barrie, just as *Erewhon* and the adjective *Erewhonian* had been by Samuel Butler some years earlier. This list is, of course, very sketchy. It omits many names, and in the case of those which it mentions only a few typical examples are given. But there would be no point in compiling a complete and exhaustive catalogue of such coinages; in fact, one could not be compiled. Nearly every well-known writer has made some contribution, though in many cases only a temporary one.

No living language is ever static; new words are con-

stantly being added. Amongst those that have appeared in our own language since the outbreak of war in 1939 (or, if they existed in it before that date, have been given prominence and come into common use) are *admass*, *anorak* (from an Eskimo word), *automation*, *beatnik* (though it existed earlier in America, with a rather different meaning),<sup>1</sup> *bikini* (named after an atoll in the Pacific Ocean), *a bind* (a boring or wearying task), *bingo* (the gambling game), *bottleneck* (in the figurative sense), *cold war*, *hovercraft*, *the iron curtain* (in its original and literal sense a theatrical term for the predecessor of the present-day safety curtain), *jeep*, *juke box*, *nylon* (with the specialised use of the plural *nylons* for *nylon stockings*), *paratroops* (a condensation of *parachute troops*) and later *paratrooper*, *prefab* (an abbreviation of *prefabricated house*), *radar*, *recap.* (a rather ugly and unnecessary abbreviation of *recapitulate* or *recapitulation*), *teddy-boy* (from the dress, which is a rather exaggerated imitation of that fashionable amongst men in the days of King Edward VII), *teenager* (originally American usage), and *welfare state* (in occasional use much earlier, but part of current English only since the publication of the Beveridge Report). There is also a growing practice of prefixing *mini-* (from *miniature*) to an already existent noun to signify a small version of the thing or article in question: e.g. *minibus*, *minicab*, *minicar*, *miniskirt*. Every year new words appear, while others extend or change their meaning: which leads us on to the subject of the next chapter.

<sup>1</sup> It is not at all certain that the word as used in Britain today is an importation of the earlier American term. It is more likely that *beat*—is from the idea of 'the beat generation', a phrase current in the 1950's to denote those young people who disclaimed any social responsibility and lived an unconventional life, that *-nik* was added by analogy with *sputnik*, the first Russian earth satellite, which had just been set in orbit and attracted much attention.

## CHAPTER VII

### CHANGE OF MEANING

ONE of the first things that the student of literature comes to realise, perhaps at first with a little surprise, is that many words have not always had the same meaning that they bear today. He may, for instance, set himself to study a few plays of Shakespeare, and soon he learns that a fool, to Shakespeare, meant something different from what it means to us, that a *battle* could be used to signify not only a fight but also a company of soldiers (equivalent to our modern word *battalion*), that *fond* implied 'foolish' more often than 'loving', and that when a character says 'I'll be with you presently' he does not mean *soon*, or *later on*, but *immediately*. Or if our student is a church-goer and familiar with the Communion Service he will probably have puzzled for some while over the prayer beginning 'Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings', and then come to realise that we are not petitioning God to hinder us in whatever we do, but to guide us, the word *prevent* being of Latin derivation and meaning *go before*. To the Elizabethans it meant to go before with the object of leading the way; to us it means rather to go before with the object of obstructing the way. Here, then, is a definite change of meaning amounting almost to a reversal.

Countless words in the English language have changed or modified their meaning in this way; and it is quite natural that they should have done. For words are not static, despite a very widespread belief to the contrary even

amongst intelligent and educated people. No less a person than Dr. Johnson, when he first began to collect the material for his dictionary, supposed that they were and that he could fix them for all time; but before he had completed his task he had altered his mind. Actually, of course, words have no independent and intrinsic meaning; they have, in fact, no meaning at all apart from that given them by the human mind and by their context; for they are essentially vehicles for the expression of thoughts and ideas on the one hand and for their evocation on the other. That is why it is a fallacy, to which the academic mentality too often falls a victim, to suppose that a word can properly be used only in its 'root' or etymological sense.

Quite clearly, a particular word may evoke different ideas, or have different associations, for different persons or different ages. Thus the word *pipe* means one thing to the smoker, another to the plumber and something else to the organ-builder, while the mention of the word *plane* will call up three distinct and widely divergent ideas in the minds of the geometrician, the carpenter and the aeronaut respectively. In the same way when an Englishman in the early days of the manorial system heard the word *villein* he merely thought of a very lowly labourer; but two hundred years later it brought to mind primarily not the social position or the occupation of such a person but his uncouth manners and behaviour, and later still it suggested an evil-doer, possibly because of a curious human tendency to identify social respectability and 'gentlemanly' behaviour with moral integrity, and to look upon their opposites with suspicion. Here then, in the story of the development of this one word, is a point of psychological and social interest. That is why the science of semantics, as it

has come to be called (the study of the historical evolution of the meaning of words), has important bearings upon other fields of investigation besides the linguistic, and why, in addition, it is one of the most human and most fascinating sides of language-study.

The methods by which words have changed their meanings and the reasons behind these changes are manifold, but the following would appear to be the chief. In some cases, quite obviously; more than one tendency has been at work, and there may be instances where a word cited in one class could just as fittingly be included in another, especially when the two types of change are similar or closely related. This is inevitable, and to have excluded such words would give a false impression that everything could be tied down and labelled neatly and finally; but generally an attempt has been made to give such examples as are at once typical and interesting from the point of view of present-day English.

1 *Generalisation.* A very frequent means by which a change of meaning occurs in a word is by the process which we may call generalisation, that is to say, a term which at one time had a specialised and restricted meaning comes, in course of time, to have a wider application. A typical example here is the word *box*, today one of the commonest and most generalised of nouns in the English language. Originally, however, it was the name of a tree and the wood from it. In *Twelfth Night*, it will be recalled, Sir Toby Belch and his cronies hide behind a box tree when they lie in wait to enjoy Malvolio's discovery of the forged letter. Being rare and expensive, box wood was used almost exclusively for making small caskets for the reception of jewellery, which receptacle, became known, in its turn, as a box. For many years, then, a box was always made



of a particular kind of wood, after which it was named, and was of quite small dimensions. Gradually, however, less insistence was laid on the material and more on the object, so that one could speak of a box of cedar wood, of oak or of walnut; but right up to the year 1700 or thereabouts the idea of smallness still attached to it. A bigger kind of receptacle was called a *chest*. So already the process of generalisation had started. But since the eighteenth century it has gone much farther, with the result that today a box may be of any material (not only wood) and of any size. And we can even speak of a horse-box on the railway or a box at the theatre, while a verb *to box* (to put or to pack into boxes) has been coined.

Similarly with the words *journey* and *journal*. Both are derived from the French noun *jour* (day). The root meaning of *journey* is a day's walk or ride, and of *journal* a daily record of events, and in the case of this latter the literal sense is still retained in the specialised use to denote (a) a diary, and (b) a book in which a business firm records its daily transactions. But for long now, in their more ordinary acceptance, both have lost this restricted meaning, so that we may speak, without any seeming incongruity, of 'a journey of several weeks' or of 'a monthly journal'. A similar extension or generalisation is to be seen in the two words *companion* and *comrade*. Literally the former means 'one who eats bread with another person' (Lat. *con*=with, *panis*=bread; cf. Fr. *pain*); just as the latter means 'one who shares a room' (It. *camera*=a room); but since those with whom we eat bread or share a room are likely to become our close friends for the time being, the inevitable shifting of emphasis took place and the modern signification of these words was evolved. In both cases, of course, the root meaning has been entirely lost and it will

probably come as a revelation to most people to learn of it.<sup>1</sup>

In many words which are used loosely today this same generalising tendency is seen actively at work, though the results of it have not always been accepted as good English. Our old friend *nice* is a clear example of this. It is still permissible to deprecate the use of it in such expressions as *a nice day*, *a nice party*, etc., but in fifty years' time it may be considered pedantic to do so.<sup>2</sup> Already we are inclined to waive any objection to which we might be entitled on etymological grounds to the use of the adjective *decent* in the sense of *pleasant* or *agreeable*, and *beastly* does not shock us nearly so much as it did our grandparents. When we speak of an army being annihilated we do not mean that it was actually reduced to nothing, any more than we mean that exactly one in ten have perished when we say that the population of a country is decimated. The term *tragedy* is no longer employed in its strictly dramatic sense, but has come to mean any occurrence which is felt to be a great calamity. *Catastrophe* has a similar significance, though that, too, could only be used originally to describe the concluding act of a tragic drama; and *crisis* is not now applied solely and exclusively to that stage in events when a turning point has been reached (as was the Greek meaning of it), but may be used, without fear of censure, in the more general sense of 'a serious situation'

<sup>1</sup> Professor Weekley, on the authority of *A Dictionary of the Canting Crew* (1690), suggests that the word *chum*, too, is a corrupted abbreviation of *Chamber fellow*.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently this loose use of the word is of long standing, for Jane Austen ridicules it in the fourth chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, and R. H. Barham (author of *The Ingoldsby Legends*) in his humorous poem 'The Jackdaw of Rheims'.

In discussing the development of the word *box* we noticed how the name of the material was extended to the object made from it. This is a very common form of generalisation. Thus we speak of an iron, a steel, a copper (both a coin and a receptacle for boiling clothes), a wood (at bowls), a nickel (an American coin), a tin (though the object so-called is not actually made of this metal), a paper (a sheet of paper, a newspaper or a dissertation) and a glass (either a mirror or a drinking glass); and in the case of the last named, when we refer to *a glass of beer*, we have carried the process of generalisation one step farther. Comparable constructions are *a cup of tea*, *a jug of water*, *a tin of biscuits*, *a box of chocolates*, etc., in all of which the name of the container is used as a measure of quantity for the contents. These all stand for indefinite quantities, but there are cases where such expressions indicate a standard recognised capacity or weight, e.g. a bag of coal, a poke of hops, a sack of potatoes, a crate of oranges; and the word *bushel*, which nowadays is used solely as a measure of capacity, equivalent to eight gallons, in the first place meant simply *a basket*; cf. the Biblical text, 'Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candle-stick' (*Matt. v*, 15). Here, however, a double process has been at work, which leads us to our next topic; but first a word on a special kind of generalisation which occurs when a proprietary trade name becomes a common noun and is used for all things or products of that kind. One of the oldest is *vaseline*. The case of the *biro pen* has been mentioned already (p. 136). Others include *cellophane*, *cyclo-style*, *hoover* (a vacuum cleaner), with the derived verb *to hoover*, *moped* (of Swedish origin), *primus stove*, *sellotape*, and *thermos flask*.

2. *Specialisation* Even more frequent than generalisation

of meaning is specialisation or restriction; and the explanation of this frequency is not far to seek. When, in the Middle English period, the absorption of considerable Norman-French elements, and later, at the time of the Renaissance, the introduction of words of Latin origin, gave rise to a large number of synonyms, the natural and almost inevitable course was for these synonyms to become differentiated one from the other; thus many words which today have a specialised application, at one time bore a much wider and more general significance. For example, if we read Chaucer we shall find that his usual word for a bird is *fowl*, and in the Authorised Version of the Bible too it is frequently used in the same sense. It comes directly from the Anglo-Saxon *fugol* and is cognate with the modern German *Vogel*. But the word *bird* (or sometimes the metathesised form *brid*) also existed in Middle English, and the result was that, for a while, the two terms were used indiscriminately as alternatives<sup>1</sup>; but gradually *bird* came to be the more general term, while *fowl* took on a specialised meaning. And similarly with *deer*. Originally it meant a wild animal (cf. Germ. *Tier*), and as late as 1481 Caxton employed it in this sense; now it refers to one particular species of animal. The old word *weeds* (clothes) is today preserved only in the phrase 'widow's weeds', and since even these went out with Queen Victoria, it is likely soon to be forgotten altogether, while *shroud*, which up to 1450 meant nothing more than a garment, now is used only in reference to death and burial. *Wedd*, as we have seen (p. 77) was the Anglo-Saxon noun signifying a pledge or a promise; hence a wedding was a pledge-giving,

<sup>1</sup> Both were used, in the same sense, by the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible. Cruden records thirty-nine examples of *fowl* and thirty-five of *bird*.

but this again has become specialised, so that the pledge is exclusively a matrimonial one. And a comparable development, though in a different direction, has taken place in the case of *doom*. All that it meant to the Anglo-Saxons, and even to Chaucer, was *judgement*—quite a neutral term, as the verb *deem*, which is derived from it, still is. *Meat* is another example; but this is mentioned elsewhere (p. 49).<sup>1</sup>

A very long list of specialisations of this kind could be drawn up. *To read* originally meant *to guess a riddle* (we still use it occasionally in that sense), and *to write* meant to scratch. In the case of this latter the process by which the modern connotation was acquired is fairly obvious, while in the former we have a curious and interesting sidelight upon the way in which our forefathers regarded the interpretation of written characters. When Chaucer used the verb *starve*, it meant no more than *to die*, just as does its modern German equivalent *sterben*, but now (in Standard English, at least) we only employ it when we mean 'to die of hunger', though in some districts it signifies 'to perish from cold'. To the person living in 1400 *stink* and *lust* conveyed no derogatory suggestion; they were merely the equivalents of our *smell* and *desire*. It remained for a later age to degrade them, along with the good old word *mistress*, which Shakespeare and the poets for many years after could use without any fear of being misunderstood. A generation less queasy than our own did not hesitate to speak of a whore or a strumpet when that was what they meant; but when the age of refinement arrived a euphemism had perforce to be found, and then, as in-

<sup>1</sup> Amongst the colliers in some districts in South Yorkshire the specialisation of the word *meat* has been carried one stage farther than in Standard English, and is used to refer only to beef.

evitably happens in such cases, the euphemism came to acquire the very associations of the word it replaced.

The verb *to preient* has been mentioned already (p. 149). We might also add *doctor* (literally *teacher*, *learned person*) and *voyage* (originally any kind of journey). Then there are the cases of *slay* and *toy*. The former is derived from the Anglo-Saxon verb *slagen* 'to strike', and in this basic sense is related to the 'sledge' of *sledge-hammer*, but in the Middle English period it had already come to signify 'to strike with fatal consequences', i.e. to kill by a blow, and then, by generalisation, to kill by any other method. It is only recently, on the other hand, that *toy* has come to mean a child's plaything; previously it was the term for any kind of triviality or bauble. Thus Shakespeare could write in *Twelfth Night* (1602),

Haply your eye shall light upon some toy  
You have desire to purchase; and your store,  
I think, is not for idle markets, sir,

while in *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) Pope could declare, somewhat cynically, of women that

With varying vanities, from every part,  
They shift the moving toyshop of their heart.

It will be noticed from the examples given that by far the greater number are indicative of a change in the downward direction—perhaps a rather melancholy commentary upon human nature, which seems always to feel a need for words to express dislike, loathing or disapproval rather than their opposites. It may be noted, too, in passing, that a word may undergo both specialisation and generalisation at different stages of its history. The case of the verb *to slay* has already been cited, and *sack*, *bag*, *crate*, *poke*, *bushel*,

etc., quoted at the end of the previous section (p. 154), are other examples. *Bushel* means first of all a basket, then, by extension, the contents of a basket, and finally, by specialisation, the contents of a basket of a particular capacity. Sometimes the general and the more specialised sense are to be found side by side for many years. Thus *cousin* (from the Latin *consanguineus* = related by blood) continued to be applied in the loose Shakespearean sense of *relative*, or even to denote a close friend who has no family connexion at all, right up to the middle of the eighteenth century; but the more definite meaning had also been in existence ever since the end of the thirteenth.

This process of specialisation is not merely one that is confined to the past. It is still operative at the present day, and a number of words or terms which in reality are (or until recently were) general in their application are in process of acquiring a much narrower and more specialised meaning. Thus the noun *prohibition*, derived as it is from the verb to *prohibit*, actually means 'the act of forbidding or prohibiting something'; but unless there is some indication to the contrary it is always the prohibition of alcoholic liquor that one understands by it nowadays. The same process of specialisation or narrowing down can be seen in the case of the terms *total abstainer*, *fundamentalist*, *nonconformist*, *evolution*, *conscription*, *conscientious objector*, etc.

3. *Extension or Transference, followed by Differentiation of Meaning.* Some words undergo a change of meaning by a process which, up to a point, is a combination of the two mentioned previously, viz. generalisation and specialisation, but which differs from them both. We may call it differentiation. Through some kind of association or resemblance a word is applied to an object or an idea other

than that for which it originally stood (that is to say, it is generalised in, so far as it now covers a wider field) but it does not, as a result, lose its earlier, basic meaning. Our mind differentiates between the original meaning and the newly acquired one, so that although it is still only one word it has two or possibly more specialised meanings. If a friend tells us he will send us a wire we do not expect to receive a length of metallic filament from him. We know that *wire* in this case means a telegram; but we also know that in another context it would mean the metallic filament previously referred to. That was the original sense of it; the other is merely a transferred meaning, originating in the fact that telegrams are sent by means of wires; but it has not displaced the earlier one or rendered it obsolete. The same process is exemplified in the expressions *to give one a ring* (telephone) and *to drop a line* (a letter or postcard). Or think of all the various meanings of the two words *board* and *book*—at least six or seven for each. The names of animals, birds and parts of the human body seem to lend themselves particularly readily to this kind of transference and differentiation. The resemblance between the bird called a crane and the machine of the same name is too obvious to need comment, and the connexion between the two different senses of the word *kite* is likewise clear, while the horse has given its name to a large number of objects. Of the limbs or organs of the body so used the chief are the leg, the arm, the foot, the eye, the lips, the fingers, the neck and the head. Now and again, of course, some of these words, borrowed long ago, appear in a guise that hides their identity from all but the trained etymologist. Thus it will probably come as a surprise to many to learn that so commonplace a word as *window*, which looks like a pure root, is actually a com-



pound, and means *the wind-eye*, i.e. the hole or opening for the admission of air into a building. To express such an idea today we should spurn so essentially English a word, and use instead the Latinised term *ventilator* (literally 'wind-carrier').

In the instances cited so far, the connexion between the different meanings is fairly obvious. But there are cases where, in the course of time, each one has been gradually modified and developed in its own way, so that they have grown farther and farther apart, and today it is difficult to recognise any common idea behind them. Such an essential unity of idea does, nevertheless, exist, and it is important that we should try to grasp it if we are to have an intelligent understanding of the value of the terms we use. Take as an example the adjective *fast*. Now here we have two meanings which, at first sight, seem almost the opposite of each other, viz. (a) quick-moving, and (b) remaining firm. The second is the earlier one, and though in Standard English it is somewhat antiquated to the point of being obsolescent, in the speech of South Yorkshire it is still widely used and very much alive. A native of this part of the country will say, 'His finger was fast in the window', or 'The rabbit had its foot fast in a trap', and it is not uncommon to hear *bed-fast* for *bed-ridden*. In London and the South this use is unknown, but something of the original sense survives in the verb *to fasten* and the construction *to make fast*. The more common meaning now, however, is that of 'quick-moving'. The original idea of firmness has given way to that of persistence, and not only persistence in immobility but also persistence in motion, and thus a new meaning has been acquired. Perhaps the same idea of firmness is behind still another use of the word, in the sense of continued abstention from food.

A comparable development is to be seen in the case of the verb *fret*. The basis of it is the Anglo-Saxon *fretan*, which meant *to eat*. Today it is usually employed as a synonym for *worry*, though it also appears, with a rather different connotation, in the term *fretwork*. The latter may possibly represent a fusion (or confusion?) during the Middle English period with the Old French verb *freter* (=to adorn), since the fretted work in architectural design was at once an adornment and had the appearance of having been 'eaten' away. The more common modern use of the term is something in the nature of a metaphorical application, signifying 'to devour or eat away with worry or anxiety'. In this sense it is found used transitively as early as 1200, but the intransitive use of it is not recorded by the Oxford Dictionary until 1551, when it appeared in More's *Utopia*.

As final examples of this kind of differentiation the two words *fine* and *brand* may be taken. Actually *fine* means 'finished' (cf. French, *finir*), but we may regard a finished object from two different points of view. We may be struck by its minuteness, as in the case, say, of the engraving of the Lord's Prayer upon a sixpence, or by its perfection, and so there develop these two divergent meanings of the word, making it possible to speak of a pen with a fine point on the one hand, and cloth of fine quality on the other. Similarly with *brand*. Connected etymologically with the verb *to burn*, in the earliest stages of its history it meant a burning piece of wood taken from the fire, and then later, by analogy and association, a piece of metal made red-hot in the fire.<sup>1</sup> Such an iron was commonly used for marking, or branding, wine casks to indicate the

<sup>1</sup> This, no doubt, is the origin of the Tennysonian use of the word as an equivalent of *sword*.

quality of the liquor; consequently the mark burnt into the wood of the cask also became known as 'the brand', and when one spoke of 'a wine of good brand' the reference was actually to the marking, though no doubt the quality which the marking represented was uppermost in the speaker's mind. Hence the word came to signify *quality*. But even that does not represent the full extent of its history. The quality of commodities frequently has a relation to their make or their place of origin, so finally *brand* came to acquire its present-day meaning.

In certain cases where widening, followed by differentiation, has thus been operative, a need seems to have been felt to indicate difference of meaning by a distinctive spelling, and so what is virtually a new word has been created. *Flour*, for instance, is merely an alternative form of *flower*, and was unknown until 1738, when it appeared in Cruden's Concordance to the Bible. As late as 1755 Johnson refused to recognise it as a legitimate spelling, and it was not until 1769 that it came to be more or less general. Today we should probably regard the two as distinct and separate words, but actually they are not; they do but indicate different but related meanings of the same word. And the same is true of *curtsey* and *courtesy*, *human* and *humane*, *gentle* and *genteel*, *urban* and *urbane*, *mask* and *masque*. To us of the twentieth century a saloon is something very different from a *salon*, yet the former of these spellings, which is usually regarded as thoroughly English in a way that the second is not, is a comparatively modern one, and *posy* (a bunch of flowers) is actually the same word as *poesy* (poetry). It must be admitted that in this case it is not easy to see the connecting link, unless it is that flowers have always been closely associated with poetry, for more reasons than one. The word *anthology*, nearly always used nowadays to

designate a collection of poems, is, literally, the Greek term for a bunch of flowers.

Then there are the two words *metal* and *mettle*. Says Flavius of the crowd in *Julius Caesar*,

See whether their basest *metal* be not moved;  
They vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness,

where today we should certainly write *mettle*. In Shakespeare's day the tendency to distinguish the spelling of the two senses was already noticeable, for both forms are found in the First Folio (1623), though used indiscriminately. At present the difference in usage is quite definite, but the two words are fundamentally the same in meaning.<sup>1</sup> *Sullen*, likewise, is another form of *solemn*, as *coffin* is of *coffer* and *catiff* of *captive*. No doubt a solemn person often appeared somewhat ungracious and ill-tempered; hence the emergence of the secondary meaning, which ultimately was distinguished by a variant spelling; and though basically *coffer* merely meant 'a chest', owing to its usual association with money it became convenient to find an alternative word to designate the particular kind of coffer in which a dead body was enclosed for burial. In the case of *captive* and *catiff*, the former comes direct from the Latin, the latter from the French; and in the same way we may account for the difference between *dainty* and *dignity*. *Scrimmage* is a metathesised form of *skirmish*, while to the doublets *antic* and *antique* a specially interesting history attaches. The first of these two words is an anglicised spelling of the second, and for long was employed synonymously and in-

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the choice of the spelling *metal* in the quotation from *Julius Caesar* was to provide a chance for a pun on a base *metal*, *base* also referring to the lowly social position of the people in question.

terchangeably with it. Duke Orsino of *Twelfth Night* asks for

That old and antic song we heard last night,  
and gets from Feste as a result the air,

Come away, come away, Death,

which incidentally, as most editors have noticed, hardly fits the description. But already in Shakespeare's day the word was undergoing a modification in meaning. Things that belonged to a former age were apt to appear quaint, and possibly there is a suggestion to this effect in the quotation just cited; quaintness gives way to the idea of something extravagantly strange and out of the ordinary, even to the point of being clownish. Thus Hamlet, it may be recalled, seeks to excuse his 'antic disposition' by claiming that it is merely feigned, and by this time we have almost reached the modern meaning of the word; but not quite. It remained for it to be transformed from an adjective to a noun signifying grotesque, clownish behaviour, and then given a plural.

4. *Association of Ideas.* At an earlier stage of this book (p. 79) we saw how the Middle English word *villain* (a labourer on the manorial estate) has given us our modern *villain* through a gradual shifting of emphasis from the original, fundamental meaning to some incidental or associated characteristic of the type of person so designated. This is by no means an isolated instance; indeed the tendency always has been, and still is, a very common one, and is well illustrated in contemporary times in our habit of stigmatising a person of shabby, untidy appearance as 'a tramp'. It is a semi-metaphorical use of the word. We know that the person in question actually is not a tramp,

for a tramp is one who tramps from place to place, but because of his mode of life he happens also to be untidy and shabby, and hence, in the popular mind, these are the primary characteristics of the tramp. So far the literary language has not admitted this meaning of the word, but many terms which we use today and which are quite good English have behind them a similar history.

It is in studying the evolution of words of this class that we come most forcibly to realise to what extent our language has been shaped, until very recently, not by the ordinary Englishman or English woman, but by the better-off and more cultured part of the population, who tended to look down upon the simple folk, especially those who lived on the land, for their lack of refinement, their ignorance and their vulgarity. Indeed the very word *vulgarity* itself is testimony to this, for coming as it does from the Latin *vulgus* (a crowd), its basic meaning is 'such behaviour as would be expected from the crowd'. And parallel developments are to be seen in the cases of *common* and *popular*. It is true, to say that a person is popular amongst his friends or even with the general public may be a commendation rather than the opposite, but to describe a book as one giving a popular presentation of a subject, or a play as one with a popular appeal, is to suggest that the author, however capable he may be, has deliberately 'written down' to his readers or his audience, while the expression 'the popular press' nearly always implies disapproval or even censure. In such words we catch a reflection of the high-brow or the expert, with their contempt for the general public and its standards. The use of *common* to denote something of indifferent quality or to describe a person whose behaviour is not quite so refined as one expects in one's own circle seems to date from the middle of the

last century; and *society*, in the sense of 'the upper class' (as though anyone below that was outside the body social) is not much older. Incidentally Greenough and Kit-tredge, in their book, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, note that the former of these two is to be heard most frequently in the conversation of women rather than of men—possibly a reflection of the more marked prevalence of social snobbishness amongst the female sex.

Many terms which today have a derogatory significance were at one time merely the names of one or another class of countryman, and carried with them no suggestion of disparagement. *Churl*, for instance, (Anglo-Saxon, *ceorl*=countryman) has suffered the same fate as *villain*; *boor* (cf. Germ. *Bauer*, Dutch *boer*), originally meant 'peasant'; a pagan is, literally, a rustic (Latin *paganus*), while the root meaning of *heathen* is nothing more nor less than 'heath-dweller,' the people in the country districts having been converted to Christianity later than those in the towns. Into the same class falls the adjective *lewd*, which to Chaucer and his contemporaries meant primarily 'unlearned' or 'ignorant', and in a secondary sense was used to denote the laity as distinct from the clergy. So in the *Prologue* we read,

If a prest be foul, on whom we truste,  
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste,

while in the medieval *Acts of Christ* occurs the sentence 'It is not meet for the lewd people to know the mysteries of God's word.' On the gradual depreciation of such a term as this no comment is necessary. It reflects a certain sense of social and moral superiority amongst the more cultured and educated classes, with a corresponding contempt for the unlettered.

Another type of change through association of ideas is exemplified in the adjective *dilapidated*, or, as it once was spelt, *delapidated*. Etymologically it is connected with the Latin word *lapides* (stones) and should only be applied to a stone building the fabric of which is in a state of decay. Literally, that is to say, it means 'unstoned', and as late as 1634 Sir Thomas Herbert could write of 'an ancient chapel, built by the Spaniards and delapidated by the Dutch'. But since a building which was 'unstoned' was obviously falling into ruins, the idea of ruin and general neglect superseded the earlier one, so that even a wooden structure could be described as dilapidated; and today we can speak of a dilapidated book, dilapidated clothes, and even a dilapidated gentleman! *Traffic* has undergone a similar change. Its real meaning is *trade* or *commerce*, and it was employed in this sense by Ruskin when he entitled one of the essays in *The Crown of Wild Olive* 'Traffic'. It is still so employed when we speak of 'the traffic in arms', 'the white slave traffic', etc. But its more common use is to denote vehicles passing to and fro through the streets of a town. Trade and commerce involve the fetching and carrying of goods, which in their turn necessitate the use of vehicles. The more traffic there is (in the original sense of the word), the busier the streets become; hence the development of meaning.

Other typical examples are to be found in the words *crescent*, *reek*, *yard* and *drive*. The first of these comes from the Latin present participle *crescens* (growing), a crescent moon being so called because it was a growing moon. But it happened that a 'growing moon' was shaped like the arc of a circle; consequently the adjective *crescent* became identified with this shape. And the final stage in its history was reached when it ceased to be an adjective and



became a noun. Today the word *reek* is usually associated with a pungent, rather offensive smell. We speak of the reek of spirits, the reek of tobacco, the reek of burning rubber, etc. Yet its earliest meaning was that of *smoke* (cf. the German verb *rauchen*). The explanation of the change is not far to seek. Or, once again, take *yard* (in the mensural sense).<sup>1</sup> Originally the ordinary, common noun for *stick*, it came at length to be used exclusively for the standard stick of thirty-six inches. Nowadays *drive* is used almost solely of mechanical vehicles; yet actually we do not drive a motor car or an engine at all; we merely direct or steer it. If we go back to the basic sense of the word, *to drive* implies the application of some sort of pressure from behind in order to set and keep an object in motion. Thus one could drive a plough, and even, by a slight stretching of the term, a horse or a herd of cattle; and in a Kentish newspaper of the late eighteenth century the present writer has lighted upon a report of a person being fined for 'driving a wheelbarrow' on a pedestrian causeway. But in the modern use of the word the idea of keeping in motion has completely superseded the original one of pushing or urging on.

Words which have a particular interest for the present day in that the change of meaning through association is fairly recent, are *Prophet*, *panel* and *sabotage*. The Greek *prophetes*, from which our own *prophet* is derived, denoted one who spoke on behalf of another, so that a prophet, in the Old Testament sense, was a messenger or spokesman of God. His message frequently took the form of warning his generation of what was in store for them if they did not mend their ways, and since he thus directed attention to

<sup>1</sup> The other word *yard* (as found in *courtyard*, *churchyard*, etc.) comes from a different root.

possible future happenings, prophecy became, in the popular mind, connected with the ability to foresee and predict events before they actually came to pass. A panel was primarily a rectangular piece of cloth, parchment or paper<sup>1</sup>; but when a list of jurors, teachers, examiners, etc., was compiled and their names set down upon such a sheet, this list also became known as a panel, for by an inevitable psychological process emphasis shifted from the actual paper to the names inscribed upon it. Now under the National Health Insurance Act a panel of doctors was established to provide free medical treatment for insured persons in return for an annual capitation payment by the State, and these became known as 'panel doctors'. The final stage was reached with the coinage of the phrase 'to go on the panel' (i.e. to take advantage of the medical benefits offered by the system). The phrase is, of course, quite illogical, since the patient is on the panel from the time he pays his first insurance contribution; but it probably would have persisted had it not been for the establishment in 1948 of the National Health Service, which rendered it superfluous, since under the scheme everyone (unless he chose not to be) became a 'panel' patient.

*Sabotage* (the wilful wrecking of machinery or neglect of duty, to the detriment of an important undertaking) is a word which has come into prominence in the last thirty-odd years. It was probably unfamiliar to the average person until 1933, when English newspapers gave prominence to the trial of some British engineers in Russia on such a charge. Since then it has been given fairly wide currency. One immediately postulates a connexion with *sabot* (a shoe), but the precise nature of this connexion is not at once apparent. The fact is that a sabot was regarded as a shoe

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the use of the word in the case of a panel in a door, etc

of very inferior quality, and for an expert shoemaker to be guilty of sabotage implied that by negligence he had scamped his work so that it was no better than we should expect to find in a sabot. So there developed the idea of culpable negligence or deliberate wrecking.

5. *Polarisation or Colouring* It sometimes happens that in the course of time a word acquires a definite 'colouring' or emotional significance for which, etymologically, there is no justification. In some cases this colouring affects it for a limited period only; in others it persists, so that to all intents and purposes a modification in meaning occurs. For instance, from the middle to the end of the eighteenth century the term *Gothic* was used in a derogatory sense, synonymous with *uncouth*, *barbarous* or *wanting in taste*; but since then it has resumed its pristine and more obvious signification, implying neither praise nor condemnation. And to the same age *enthusiasm* meant what *fanaticism* means to us. The adjective *Victorian*, at one time quite colourless, now implies some degree of condemnation, though not quite so much as it did twenty years ago, while *nationalism*, which first appeared in the language in 1844 without any particular emotional tone, has today fallen into disrepute. *Patriotism*, on the other hand, has taken on a colouring of the opposite description. Both words refer to the same kind of devotion to a national cause, but if we approve of it we call it patriotism, if we disapprove we call it nationalism.

One of the best examples of the way in which, in the course of a single generation, a word can thus change its meaning or take on new associations is provided by the now all-important *propaganda*. A derivative of the verb *to propagate*, it was first used to designate a committee of the Roman Catholic Church appointed for the purpose

of organising and directing mission work. Later it was extended to cover mission work or publicity on behalf of any cause, whether religious, political, sociological or philanthropic. As such it implied the dissemination of information to enlighten the public and so to win support for the cause in question. There was no sinister suggestion about it. Its object was to create an informed public opinion, and it was in this sense that it was used up to 1914. The change in its meaning took place during the war that started in that year. In order to stir up patriotic fervour and maintain hatred of the enemy, it became necessary for all the belligerent governments to circulate exaggerated atrocity stories and false or 'doctored' news. The aim of propaganda was no longer to enlighten but to mislead and deceive the public so as to sway its sympathies in a desired direction or to a desired end. This sense the term has retained ever since, so that today to describe a statement or a piece of news as propaganda is *ipso facto* to suggest that it is false, or at best a distortion of the truth. The small schoolgirl, who defined the word as meaning 'to tell lies' was, in fact, giving a fairly accurate definition of it in its modern sense. But originally it meant something quite different.

The case of *bolshevik* is discussed elsewhere (p. 252). It does not excite so much horror now as it did forty years ago, but then, except in the context of history, it is obsolescent, though when it is used it is still a strongly coloured term. A very similar development is to be seen in the case of the word *anarchist*. Actually an anarchist is a person who stands for a form of government directly the opposite of the totalitarian; i.e. one where the administration is decentralised as far as possible, where the individual has the maximum of liberty that is compatible with public

order, where the 'state,' as a coercive force, is practically non-existent, and where laws are few and simple. Anarchism is obviously an idealist conception of society and demands a high sense of moral responsibility in the individual. But to most people the term means nothing of this. The comparative absence of law under anarchism has been interpreted by the popular mind to mean lawlessness or defiance of all constituted authority, so that the term *anarchist* has come to signify a person who advocates terrorism and violence as a means to achieve political ends, and spends his time stirring up trouble.

It will be noticed that many of the words mentioned above owe their colouring to political or religious prejudice, a discovery which should not cause surprise to anyone. But not all are bound up with controversy and polemics. Take, for instance, the verb *to harbour*. Nowadays one harbours criminals, spies, suspects, etc., and old clothes or furs harbour moths; in point of fact anything that is harboured is something undesirable. But on its first appearance in the language (in 1460) the word was not restricted in this way; it merely meant 'to give shelter'. One could harbour a traveller or a pilgrim without feeling that the act was in any way open to question or suspicion. And a similar modification has taken place in *fellow*. Readers of *Twelfth Night* may recall Malvolio's pleasure at hearing himself referred to by his mistress Olivia as 'fellow'.

'And when she went away now. "Let this fellow be looked to." Fellow! Not Malvolio, nor after my degree, but fellow!'

To a person living in the twentieth century this might sound like contempt; but Malvolio had good reason for feeling pleased, for in Elizabethan English to refer to anyone as

*fellow* was virtually to place him on a level with oneself. Something of this sense still remains, of course, when we speak of the fellows of a college, or of a learned society, and in such combinations as *fellow-men*, *fellow-citizens*, etc. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century the word had undergone a sad declension, in witness whereof we have Pope's line,

Worth makes the man and want of it the fellow.

At the present time the same tendency can be seen at work with the word *amateur*. As is apparent from the term itself, an amateur is a person who does a thing for the love of it, but in these days of experts and specialists the efforts of such a person are apt to appear unskilful, so that to call anyone an amateur at a job is, in some degree, to depreciate and discredit him, hence the significance of the title of Jeffery Farnol's novel, *The Amateur Gentleman*.

6. *Loss of Distinctive Colouring.* This does not often occur, but there are a limited number of words in the English language which have undergone a change in this direction. It most easily happens, once again, in the case of words with a religious or political significance, especially those which in the beginnings were applied to minorities or to unpopular views. As controversy dies down, and as suspicion and odium are allayed by the lapse of time, the words in question become depolarised and their distinctive colouring is lost. The word *Christian* itself, as is well known, was originally a term of derision; so were *Methodist* and *Methodism*; and the appellation *Quaker*, now virtually accepted by the Society of Friends themselves as an alternative name, was bestowed upon the sect in mockery by Judge Bennet of Derby because George Fox bade him and all those present in court quake at the name of the

Lord. Mohammedanism is no longer associated in our minds with the Evil One and his works, nor does a Free-thinker appear to us the same reprobate that he did to our grandparents of fifty years ago. The controversies of which these terms were born no longer have any meaning for us, and with the passing of interest in the issues in which they were involved, the terms themselves have become neutralised.

Another group of words which have been similarly depolarised are the trio *policy*, *politics* and *politician*, all terms suggestive of dishonesty and trickery to Shakespeare and his generation—and, indeed, to a much later age, as witness the line of our National Anthem,

Confound their politics,

which, being interpreted, means ‘bring to nought their intrigues’. Sir Andrew Aguecheek, too, it will be recalled, had the utmost detestation of policy, and declared that he would ‘as lief be a Brownist as a politician’. But in these days all three words have become respectable (nominally, at least), as they were among the Greeks, from whom they have been borrowed.<sup>1</sup> And then there is *brave*, which has become synonymous with *courageous* only in comparatively recent times. In the seventeenth century it conveyed an idea more akin to *boastful* (cf. *bravado*), or, when applied to inanimate or impersonal things, *gaudy*.

7. *Metaphorical Application.* Before dealing with this class of word something should be said concerning its scope and limitation. Almost any word or expression is capable of being used metaphorically, but in the major-

<sup>1</sup> It may be noted in passing, however, that in modern American English the word *politician* is used in a derogatory sense, more or less equivalent to *opportunist*.

rity of cases it is consciously and deliberately so employed and is recognisably figurative in force. It is not, however, with this type that we are at present concerned, but with that much smaller but equally important group consisting of words so familiar to us that until we pause to consider them we fail to realise that they are used in anything but a literal sense. Such words fall into two classes: viz. (a) those where the literal use is still preserved so that the metaphorical application constitutes what is virtually a new meaning or a new word, and (b) those where the metaphorical sense has gained precedence over, or even usurped altogether the place of, the literal one. Into the former of these two categories fall most of the words to which we have recourse to describe the feelings or certain qualities of character and intellect: *keen*, *dull*, *sharp*, *bright*, *volatile*. *Sad* and *silly*, on the other hand, belong to the second class. On both of these something has been said at an earlier stage of the book. The original meaning of *sad* was *full* (cf. Gothic *saðs*, Germ. *satt*, Latin *satis*). By Elizabethan times it had come to mean *sober* or *serious* and is so used frequently by Shakespeare as well as by the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible.

‘ And he said unto them, “ What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another as ye walk, and are sad?” ’

(Luke xxiv, 17.)

Nay, but the devil take mocking: speak sad brow and true maid.

(*As You Like It*, iii, 2.)

And after that he came thus sad away?

(*Julius Caesar*, i, 2.)



Clearly, the change has come about through a metaphorical application of the term, denoting 'full of thought or seriousness'; and finally, by an extension of the metaphor, it becomes 'full of sorrow'. *Silly*, from the Anglo-Saxon *saelig*, originally meant *happy*; then it came to denote an idea something akin to that expressed in our present-day adjectives *simple* or *innocent*, since, presumably, simplicity and innocence were felt to be most conducive to happiness. Thus Archimago, the enchanter of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, describes himself as

Silly old man, that lives in hidden cell.

The transition from *simple* or *innocent* to *stupid* is an obvious one.

In the case of the two words just discussed the literal and fundamental meaning has long since been forgotten. On the other hand, when we call a person a crank, implying that his ideas are bent or warped,<sup>1</sup> we are giving a metaphorical interpretation to a word which is still widely used in the literal sense; and the same is true when we speak of 'padding' in an essay or a book. There are cases, too, in which the literal meaning still remains but, having become subordinate to the figurative, has been relegated to second or even to third place; and in still other instances there is a tendency to regard the better-known metaphorical use as the literal one, and the older and primary sense as a metaphorical derivative. The word *bias* is an example of this. Actually, of course, it is a technical term taken from the game of bowls, but today this is regarded as a specialised use of it; more frequently it is employed to describe a 'leaning' in a person's views or opinions. *Chest* is another

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally the word *warped* is also a metaphor, since it comes from the Anglo-Saxon verb *weorpan* (to throw).

of the same type. Its usual association today is with the part of the human anatomy that is so named, yet this, again, was in the first place but a half-humorous, figurative application of the normal word for a box.<sup>1</sup> *Outpost*, a military metaphor, has long since ceased to have any military connexions or suggestions for the average person,<sup>2</sup> and few of us realise, when we describe anyone as a hypocrite, that the term comes almost unchanged from ancient Greece, where it meant 'a play actor', hence one who pretends to be what he is not.

Finally in this class we may take a pair of words which, though they come from widely different fields of interest, show similar characteristics in their development: namely *pineapple* and *broadcast*. As late as the mid-seventeenth century a pineapple meant what we should now call a pine-cone. The tropical fruit so familiar to us today was then scarcely known except to travellers, who gave it its native name *ananas* (sometimes incorrectly shortened to *anana*), and we find it thus referred to occasionally in the literature of the time. The present-day English appellation is obviously due to its resemblance, in shape and general appearance, to a large pine-cone. *Broadcast* is an example of a double metaphor. For the last forty years it has been employed almost exclusively in connexion with the dissemination of news, music, talks, etc. by wireless, and many of the younger generation, no doubt, are unfamiliar with its use in any other sense. But before it came to mean this it was used to describe the spreading of information far and wide by word of mouth (with perhaps a suggestion

<sup>1</sup> For the same tendency in a foreign language compare the French *lête* (head), derived from the Low Latin *testa* (a pot).

<sup>2</sup> There has perhaps been a temporary revival of the original association, owing to the war.

of indiscretion in so doing). Even this, however, was a figurative use of the word. In its original and literal sense it denoted a method of sowing seed by taking a handful and scattering it as widely as possible over the ground; but with the coming of mechanical methods of agriculture this sense became obsolete. Our present-day application of the term, therefore, which we tend to regard as the primary one, has actually come to us at third-hand.

Many more examples could be given to illustrate the way in which words change their meaning through thus taking on a metaphorical connotation. But for the time being enough has been said. The whole question of metaphor is to be considered in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

8. *Euphemism*. Euphemism is the description given to that figure of speech by which one seeks to hide the real nature of something unpleasant or repugnant by giving it a less offensive name, and there are certain words which have changed their meaning through being frequently used in this way. Some euphemisms savour of affectation and are the products of a false sense of delicacy or refinement, but these are usually confined to a particular historical period and disappear when tastes change. The more permanent ones are chiefly associated with death, illness or disease, subjects which, quite understandably, might cause a certain amount of pain or distress if discussed in plain terms. For example, *passing* and *decease* have both become synonyms for death, and *to pass away* or *to fall asleep* are very commonly used instead of the verb *to die*, particularly on tombstones and memorials, while no insurance agent would ever urge a prospective client to take out a policy to provide for his family in case he should die; instead he hints at the possibility of something happening to him. According to its strict etymological derivation,

*cemetery* means a *sleeping-place*, and *undertaker* (actually a very general designation, denoting one who undertakes some kind of task or business) has assumed a specialised meaning by dropping the adjective which at one time always accompanied it and without which it would have been unintelligible—*funeral* undertaker. As so frequently happens, however, this particular euphemism has gradually acquired all the distasteful associations of the word it replaced, with the result that many undertakers are now beginning to call themselves funeral directors, funeral furnishers, and even morticians!<sup>1</sup>

Other euphemistic devices are hidden behind the words *accident*, *casualty* and *fatality*. Strictly speaking an accident means merely 'a happening' (Lat. *accidere*, to happen or occur), a casualty, 'one whom something has befallen' (Lat. *casus*, past participle of the verb *cadere*=to fall), while a fatality and the allied adjective *fatal*, nowadays implying *deadly* or *death-giving*, denote merely something that is attributable to Fate. For madness a large number of euphemisms exist. *Natural*, a favourite Shakespearean word, is now obsolete in this sense, though other terms have replaced it. To call a person simple is clearly an attempt to state the fact as considerately and kindly as possible, and the word *insane*—the usual one nowadays—actually means no more than *unhealthy*. *Idiot* (from the Gk. *idiotes*) is literally 'a private person', the reference being possibly to the necessity of keeping a madman apart from society, or perhaps to his being different from other people, while *lunatic* and *lunacy* take us back to the old belief that madness was due

<sup>1</sup> I take the following from the *Evening News*: 'Because it is considered that the word "undertaker" is out of date, Caterham Cemetery by-laws are to be amended, and the designation "funeral director" substituted.'

to the influence of the moon. The most recent expression of this kind to become current English is probably the phrase 'a mental case', which, taken at its face value, carries no suggestion of mental deficiency, though everyone understands it to mean that. We even hear the adjective *mental* in ordinary conversation as a synonym for *mentally deficient*, but so far this has not been recognised as 'good English'. Wyld's *Universal English Dictionary* (1932) lists it, but describes it as colloquial.

9. *Prudery*. As stated earlier, a number of euphemistic expressions are traceable to a false sense of delicacy and refinement rather than a genuine desire to avoid giving pain or embarrassment—in other words, to prudery. And allied to this there is sometimes also an element of social snobbery and affectation. Examples are *paying guest* for *boarder*, *financier* for *money-lender* and *turf-accountant* for *book-maker*. Even plumbers are beginning to call themselves sanitary engineers and butchers meat purveyors, while in journalistic language an approaching birth is referred to mysteriously as 'an interesting event' and pregnancy as 'a certain condition'. Most expressions of this kind are products of a particular period and survive for a time only. The mid- and late nineteenth century, the age *par excellence* of respectability, produced a good crop of them, most of which are now only linguistic curiosities. In the few decades before the 'naughty nineties', for instance, it was 'not done' to refer in plain terms to a pair of gentleman's trousers, particularly in mixed company. Readers of *Oliver Twist* may remember the embarrassment of the tinker when he thought that Giles the butler was about to commit such a social *faux pas* in his account of how he pursued the burglars who had broken into the house on the previous night.

'I tossed off the bedclothes,' said Giles, throwing away the table-cloth and looking very hard at the cook and the housemaid, 'got softly out of bed, drew on a pair of ..'

'Ladies present, Mr. Giles,' murmured the tinker.

'Of shoes, sir,' said Giles, turning upon him and laying great emphasis upon the word.

*Expectorate*, as a substitute for *spit*, belongs to the same period, having been first used in that sense, so the Oxford Dictionary assures us, by Lord Lytton in 1827; and so perhaps does the expression 'a fallen woman', to denote a prostitute. Up to the end of the eighteenth century one could refer to *guts* and *belly* either in print or in conversation without occasioning embarrassment or discomfiture, but by the Victorian age they had become so vulgar as to be unmentionable, and the more 'refined' *stomach* was used in their stead. *Serviette* belongs to a later age; and incidentally the history of its vicissitudes is not without interest. The older word was, of course, *table-napkin*. The more polite alternative seems to have made its appearance in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but was at first regarded as an affectation. Thus we read in a novel published in 1889 that 'Mordaunt and Scarnell always spoke of table-napkins as serviettes' and even in 1906 an author could ridicule a character by declaring that 'I think she was the sort that would call a table-napkin a serviette.' From this it seems clear that it was at that time one of the latest 'polite' terms; yet only a few years later, in 1914, the Oxford Dictionary says of it, 'It may be regarded as naturalised, but latterly has come to be considered as vulgar.' Since 1914, however, and despite the Oxford Dictionary, the objection to it has been waived, and today the word is in regular use, having completely

ousted the earlier term, save possibly amongst a few of the older generation.

A number of other words in common use today have originated as euphemisms in just the same way. *Lavatory* for instance (literally 'a washing-place'), was, until a few years ago the commonest of the polite terms for what auctioneers prefer to call, even more vaguely, 'an office', public authorities 'a convenience'. Now, however, even *lavatory* is felt by many people to be indelicate, and *toilet*, borrowed from America is used instead. English susceptibilities are frequently shocked by the more direct expressions used in most Continental countries. *Handkerchief* is another of these euphemistic words designed to avoid giving offence to good taste and social delicacy. Ben Jonson called it, unashamedly, *a muckinder*, a word which, admittedly, does sound a little gross; but our present term, on the other hand, is something of a contradiction, since *kerchief* means a 'head-covering', and to speak of a 'hand-head-covering' is, to say the least, scarcely common sense. *Pocket-handkerchief* introduces a further complication.

As a final example we may take the noun *manure*, a doublet of *manoeuvre* and first recorded by the Oxford Dictionary in 1540. It seems to have been used first as a verb, signifying to put into the ground artificially (i.e. by hand) the fertility that the crops were taking out. Then it became a noun. For many centuries the word *dung* had been employed (and still is in many country districts) and no one was sensible of anything vulgar about it; but when the age of propriety and refinement arrived a more polite expression must needs be found. Whatever the word, however, it still stood for the same thing, and before many generations had passed (as we have seen in a number of other cases) *manure* also began to be

considered vulgar, with the result that recently horticulturalists have begun to abandon the term *chemical* or *artificial manure* in favour of *fertiliser*.

10. *Reversal of Meaning.* Many words which might have been included in this class have already been treated under other heads or will be so treated, for a word may change its meaning to the point of actually reversing it for any of the reasons already specified or to be specified hereafter. But two or three examples of particular interest, which are more suitably grouped together than scattered throughout the chapter, may be mentioned here. One is the word *grocer*. At the present day it refers almost exclusively to a retail trader, but at one time, as its derivation suggests, it meant only a wholesaler, i.e. a person who dealt '*en gros*' (in bulk). The smaller tradesman, who sold to customers over the counter, was called a spicer (Fr. *épicier*). Perhaps the change came about by what we may call a shifting of emphasis; if the wholesaler sold in bulk, the retailer bought in the same way. Then there is the adjective *restive*, which looks as if it ought to mean *still* or *at rest*, but actually means just the opposite. In point of fact, however, it did at one time signify this, or at least something akin to it. A *restive* horse was an obstinate horse, which refused to go forward but stubbornly remained standing where it was. Now as such a horse was troublesome and unmanageable, gradually the idea of its being out of control superseded that of its remaining stationary; and as lack or defiance of control usually shows itself in a more active manner, *restive* came to mean *impatient* or *fretful*.

The verb *to scan* also falls into this class. Derived from the French *scander* and the Latin *scandere*, its root meaning is 'to read through carefully'; but at the



present time it is more frequently used in the sense of 'to read through rapidly and perfunctorily'. Occasionally, too, a term reverses its meaning through an ironic application. This is the case with *wiseacre*, which now has a derogatory significance; but there was a time when it meant literally what it says: i.e. a wise-sayer (from the Dutch: cf. Icelandic *saga*=a story).

11. *Popular Misunderstanding*. A while ago the present writer was presented with an essay containing the following sentence. 'The dulating plain stretched far away towards the horizon.' On inquiring of the student concerned the meaning of this strange word *dulating*, he was told, in all seriousness, and with some surprise at his ignorance, that it meant *flat* or *level*, and further inquiry elicited that it had been suggested by *undulating*. *Undulating* meant 'hilly', so *dulating* must obviously mean flat! What the student had failed to realise was that the *un-* was not, as he had supposed, the English negative prefix, but an integral part of the root of the word, which was derived from the Latin *unda* (a wave), so that an undulating stretch of country was one where the surface of the land went up and down in waves.

Misunderstandings of this kind have been responsible for a change of meaning in certain words in our language. The case of *helpmate* has been cited already. Another is the adjective *preposterous*. Its contemporary usage equates it with some such phrase as 'intolerably absurd', but there is not the slightest etymological justification for reading such a meaning into it. The first half of the word is a combination of the two Latin prefixes *pre* and *post* (*before* and *after*), and in the literal sense a preposterous situation is one where, so to speak, the cart is put before the horse. If, for instance, a business man, by some strange combination of

circumstances, found himself in a position where he had to submit to the authority of one who ordinarily was his subordinate, that might be described as preposterous; in a literal sense the first is last and the last first. But situations of this kind are not only absurd; they usually tend to annoy us and outrage our feelings; hence the alteration in the meaning of the word.

Then there is also the noun *premises*. As a term in logic it refers to certain given facts in a syllogism or chain of argument from which certain other facts are deduced. But in old legal documents it was also used to refer back to property, etc., which had been fully described at an earlier stage. In a title deed, for instance, a detailed description of the property would be set out at the beginning, and then, whenever there was need to refer to it again, instead of repeating all the facts, it would be called 'the premises', i.e. the 'things mentioned before'. So people came to think of *premises* as meaning a house, a building, etc.

For some years now the verb *to transpire* has been used (or rather misused) as though it were synonymous with *occur* or *happen*, though it is condemned by all the recognised authorities; but it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that in the long run usage will prevail over pedantry. It certainly has done so in the case of *emergency*. Any Latinist will at once recognise the word as denoting 'something that comes to the surface', i.e. which emerges. But things which emerge, especially if they emerge suddenly and unexpectedly, are apt to create an awkward situation, and no doubt this fact, combined perhaps with a tendency to confuse the word with *urgency*, has produced the meaning which is generally accepted today. Or again, the verb *to demean* meant originally *to conduct* (cf. *demeanour*), but owing to a mistaken idea that it was connected with the

adjective *mean*, the modern signification became attached to it; and *pester* has developed in the same way through an etymological blunder which made it a derivative of *pest*. Actually it came from the French *empestrer*, meaning *to entangle*, and it was in this sense that it was first used in English.

It may be noticed in passing that where one word has been mistakenly associated with another in this way, there has usually been some kind of superficial and accidental connexion between them to account for the mistake. This has already been pointed out in the case of *emergency* and *premises*; and the same is true of the other words mentioned. For instance 'to demean oneself suitably before one's superiors' actually meant to 'conduct oneself, etc.', but since the context implied a certain amount of humility and respect in one's bearing it is very easy to see how the supposed connexion with *mean* was established. When one was pestered (i.e. entangled or involved) with some business, one naturally felt annoyed, so that the business did, in effect, become something of a pest; hence, again, the tendency to relate the two terms, though actually they were quite distinct one from the other.

In this class of word also (though it is not quite a mistaken meaning in the same sense as the others) we may include the name of that modern weapon of warfare, the tank, so called, it is said, because, with a view to keeping the real nature of the work secret, the workmen who made the armour plates for the earliest models were told that they were for the manufacture of a special kind of tank for use by the army!

12. *Proper Names become Ordinary Parts of Speech.* Something has already been said upon this subject in the chapter dealing with the development of vocabulary, so it is not

necessary to treat it at any length here, save to observe that, through the force of association, the precise significance of the proper name is not always retained. The word *dunce*, for instance, is derived from the name of the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus, whose opponents represented him as a dry-as-dust theorist, devoid of true scholarship. Thus the word meant not *blockhead*, as it does today, but rather 'a pretender to learning; one who is uninspired and uninspiring.' And this is what Pope understood by it when he pilloried the dunces of his day in his satirical poem *The Dunciad*. In *guy* the notorious Guy Fawkes of the Gunpowder Plot is commemorated, though here again there has been some modification of meaning, for there is nothing to warrant our assuming that that much maligned person was grotesque or ridiculous in appearance, a connotation of the word which comes from the effigies of him which are burned on bonfire-night. An atlas is so called from the fact that at one time the figure of Atlas, bearing the world on his shoulders, was printed on the front of it, and the verb *to meander* owes its existence to the winding river of that name in Asia Minor. *Bedlam* is an abbreviation of *Bethlehem Hospital*, the famous lunatic asylum of London. Shakespeare uses the word as an alternative for *madman*, (i.e. one fit to be confined in Bedlam), but this meaning is now obsolete and has given place to that of noise and confusion. *Maudlin* is derived from the name of Mary Magdalene (weeping Mary) of St. Matthew's Gospel, while we have it on the authority of Professor Weekley that the original Hooligans were an Irish family, notorious for their rowdiness and riotous behaviour, who lived in Southwark at the end of the last century and frequently figured in the police courts.

Here, then, are the twelve chief methods by which

words have changed their meaning, though as was said at the beginning of the chapter, it is not always possible to draw a hard and fast division between the various classes. Certain of the examples which are cited in one category could with equal justification have been included in another, and there are a few odd words which will not fall conveniently into any of them. For instance, there is the inexplicable use of *father-in-law* in the sense of *stepfather*, which is frequent in Dickens and which the Oxford Dictionary has found exemplified, sporadically, over a period of more than three hundred years, stretching from 1552 to 1876. The last English writer to use it is said to have been George Eliot, though it may have persisted in the spoken language for some years later. Then there is the modification in the temporal significance of certain adverbs or adverb-equivalents. Every student of Shakespeare knows that in Elizabethan English *presently* meant *at once*, where it now means *later on*. The same change has taken place in *by and by* and *directly*—a rather pointed commentary on the ease with which we fall victims to the vice of procrastination.

Many words, naturally, have undergone more than one kind of change during their history. The case of *sad* has been discussed on page 175, so that there is no need to go into it again, though we may observe by way of addition that a metaphorical use of the word is to be found in the expression 'sad bread', or 'sad pastry' i.e. bread or pastry which has gone heavy in the cooking. *Glad* has a similar history. Connected etymologically with the words *glade* and *glide*, its root-meaning is *smooth* (cf. Germ. *glatt*). But smoothness frequently produces brightness, and thus the next stage of its evolution was reached when it became synonymous with *bright*, in which sense it is related to the

verb *glitter* and the now archaic *glede*, a red-hot piece of coal. Finally the literal meaning was superseded by the metaphorical one of 'bright by disposition'.

An especially complicated development attaches to the words *romance*, *fairy*, *bureau*, *miniature*, and *gossip*. For *romance* a modern dictionary will give a considerable number of definitions, but in the first place it was an adjective derived from the proper noun *Rome*. We still preserve this meaning today when we speak of Romance Languages, i.e. those which are derived from Latin. In the Middle Ages a new type of literature sprang up in these Romance tongues, and especially in France: fictitious stories of heroism and adventure, and so these came to be known as *romans*, or romances. There was, for instance, the famous *Romaunt of the Rose*, first written in French and later translated, in part, by Chaucer. Now in these stories, besides adventure, there was often a love element, and so at a later date a romance came to denote a love story. From a fictitious love story the term was extended (probably by journalists) to describe a story of real love, particularly if it contained a certain amount that was adventurous and out of the ordinary, and then to denote an absorbing interest in things much less personal and more mundane. Thus we can now speak of 'the romance of engineering', 'the romance of the aeroplane', etc. Here there is no kind of sentimental attachment indicated, but there is a suggestion of the same kind of absorbing interest in and devotion to the subject in question that lovers might be expected to have for each other. But even this is not the end of the history of the word. It was not forgotten that, despite the latest use of it, it did originally stand for something that was fictitious, so now it was made to serve as a general name for any tale that was untrue; that is to say,

it became a synonym for 'a tall story'. And it reached its final stage of development when a verb *to romance* (i.e. to tell a tale that is untrue or is very much exaggerated) was coined.

The history of *bureau* is almost as involved. In the first place it meant a cloth (Old French *bure*); then a table or desk the top of which was covered by such a cloth; then the room or office in which the desk was situated; then the people who occupied the office; and finally (a semi-abstract use) a department, organisation or agency for the transaction of public business, as a travel bureau, labour bureau, appointments bureau, etc. *Fairy* is, more correctly, not a common but a collective noun, denoting the whole company of fays—for this was the earlier term for these diminutive creatures of folklore—and when Spenser entitled his well-known poem *The Faerie Queene* he was using the word in this sense. No one will need to be told that *fay* is an anglicised form of the French *fée*, which in its turn comes from the Latin *fata* (fates), though nowadays any notion of fatalism that may have been associated with fairy-lore in its remote beginnings has completely disappeared. Then there is the case of *miniature*. A miniature was so called from the fact that the earliest examples were executed in red lead (*minium*) on vellum or ivory; but since they were usually small in size, eventually less significance was attached to the material than to the dimensions, and the word came merely to mean 'a small-sized portrait, executed delicately and in great detail'. Then, by generalisation, it acquired an adjectival force and was applied to anything which might be regarded as a small-scale model or imitation. As for *gossip*, this is another example of a corruption, for it is derived ultimately from the Anglo-Saxon combination *god-sib*

(related in God) and meant *god-parent*. The line of development seems to have been roughly as follows: god-parent or sponsor > companion > boon companion or confidant > babbler. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* contains the word used in both the first and the second senses, and the author of the Chester miracle play of Noah's Flood is probably employing the third when he puts into the mouth of Noah's wife, as she refuses to enter the ark, the words,

But I have my gossippes everyechone,  
One foote further I will not gone;  
They shall not drowne, by Sante John,  
And I may save ther life.

And now, having dealt at such length with the fortunes and adventures of so many English words, and seen how they have changed, differentiated and multiplied their meanings, it is necessary to sound a note of warning. We must beware of supposing that homonyms (i.e. words which are spelt and pronounced the same but which differ in meaning)<sup>1</sup> are necessarily derived from the same root and therefore examples of differentiation. The would-be etymologist often falls into this trap (though the intelligent use of any reliable dictionary will help him to avoid it) and so goes sadly astray, besides perpetrating some veritable linguistic howlers. More often than not such pairs of words come from entirely different roots.

<sup>1</sup> Homonyms must not be confused with homophones, i.e. words like *key* and *quay*, *vain*, *vane* and *vein*, *bough* and *bow*, etc., which differ in spelling but are pronounced alike. Robert Bridges estimated that English contains no fewer than eight hundred pairs of groups of such words. Again, of course, most of these come from different sources, though a few, like *flower* and *flour* (see p. 162) are merely examples of different spellings of the same word.



In some cases the identity of spelling and pronunciation has arisen by perfectly normal development, in others it is due to the force of analogy, which tends to approximate a less familiar word to a more familiar one. Thus the burden that one bears is of Anglo-Saxon origin (*byrðen*) but the burden of a song is from the French *bourdon*. The gloss on a piece of polished furniture comes from the same Icelandic root as *glass*, whereas the gloss to a literary text goes back, through Latin, to Greek. The chessman known as a pawn derives its name from the Old French *paon* (a foot-soldier, thus one of the lowest rank), but the verb *to pawn* comes from a different source—probably through French from the Latin *pannus* (a cloth), and thus is connected with the word *panel*, discussed on page 169. A military tattoo is Dutch in origin, and meant at first 'a drum-beat'; the tattoo marks which at one time were so common on the arms of sailors are, however, named after the island of Tahiti, whose inhabitants were reputed to be particularly expert at executing these designs. Similarly distinction must be made between the various meanings of *cleave*, *pen*, *tent*, *foil*, *fair*, *yard*, etc., to mention only a few examples from a very long list.

And finally a word on false etymology. No field of study is so alluring and attractive to the mere amateur as that of the origin and development of words, and in no field can one so easily go astray. Swift once wrote a mock essay on *The Antiquity of the English Tongue*, in which he held up to ridicule, as only Swift knew how, the absurd explanations offered by some of the linguistic quacks of his day. As an example he selected the name of Alexander the Great, and after rejecting several theories as inadequate (amongst them the obvious one), he finally accepted, as authentic, the following. This particular

monarch was very fond of roast eggs, so that whenever he entered a town in state, huge fires were made in grates and a number of cooks stood ready with the eggs. At the appropriate moment the chief cook called out the order, 'All eggs under the grate', and thus was the name derived. The name of Andromache, too, is ingeniously explained. 'Her father was a Scotch gentleman of a noble family still subsisting in that kingdom. Hector fell in love with his daughter, and the father's name was Andrew Mackay. The young lady was called by the same name, only a little softened to the Grecian accent.'

The absurdity of such a story is patent, as Swift intended it to be; but it is not so much more stupid than some attempts which have been made, in all seriousness, to explain certain words in our language. Take, for example, the foolish anecdote of the knighting of the loin of beef by King Henry VIII, quite obviously apocryphal, for the first syllable of *sirloin* is merely the French word *sur* (on, above). Or take again the explanation, for long widely accepted, that the word *beefeater* was a corruption of a French term *beaufetier*. Such a term has, in fact, never existed, and *beefeater* means precisely what it says—one who eats beef<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> With regard to the derivation from *beaufetier*, Wyld (*Universal English Dictionary*) says, 'there never was the slightest historical or linguistic evidence in its favour. The word means what it seems to mean.' Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* gives the 'beaufetier' explanation, and then goes on, 'others suppose they (i.e. the beefeaters) obtained their name from the easiness of their duty, as having scarce more to do than to eat the King's beef.' In his edition of Grose's work (1931) Eric Partridge accepts this latter explanation as correct, adding, 'the beaufetiers are imaginary, and the success of the myth was promoted by Mrs Markham's inclusion of the story in her once-household *History of England*.'

But if, in this particular case, as in that of Swift's Alexander, the obvious explanation is the correct one, we should be very careful about attaching too much credence to these easy and 'obvious' etymologies, which are not always so obvious as they seem. A very attractive explanation can be made out by this means, but as often as not it proves incorrect. In the earlier part of this book (p. 37) we have referred to Maidstone. A few miles higher up the Medway stands Tonbridge. Many a native will tell us that the word means 'the town on the bridge,' and as proof will point to the old bridge over the river around which are grouped a number of ancient buildings. But if we refer to Domesday Book we shall find it mentioned there as Tonebrige, the first element of which Ekwall, in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, takes to be a personal noun. So the word probably signifies 'Tunna's bridge'

Place-names, it is true, run the greatest risk of being thus wrongly derived, but there is the same danger also with certain of the ordinary, common words which we use in our everyday speech. *Shamefaced*, for instance, has no connexion whatever with *face*, but is a corruption of *shamefast* (i.e. rooted in shame); *causeway* is derived from the French *chaussée*, while *humble pie* is not connected etymologically with humility, though association of ideas may have suggested such a relationship. Actually the expression is another example of metanalysis (see p. 122) the earliest form being *numble-pie* (O. Fr. *nomble*=the inferior parts of a stag). Presumably after a hunt the servants partook of those parts of the animal which their masters considered it beneath their dignity to eat. Or again, the ticket sent with a delivery of goods and called an invoice has no relation to *voice*, but

is a development from the French word *envoi* (cf. *envoyer*, to send); *sentry* comes from *sanctuary*, not from *sentinel*, in spite of its close approximation in meaning to the latter term; *venue* (in the sense of a place for holding a meeting, a function, etc.) is a derivative of the Latin *vicinitum* (a district; cf. the English *vicinity*), and not, as one might at first sight suppose, of *venu*, the past participle of the French verb *venir* (to come); and the adjective *touchy* is not formed from the verb *to touch*. It is a corruption of *tetchy*, which means 'infected'.

Other examples could be quoted, but enough has been said to illustrate the point under discussion. The study of etymology is a fascinating and informative one, but unless followed out scientifically it can lead us into some strange vagaries and errors. Never make a guess at the derivation of a word, even if it looks too obvious for there to be any doubt about it. Refer to some reliable authority. Only too frequently it is the most obvious-looking words that are the most misleading, for analogy and corruption work exactly in this way. They transform something that is a little strange or out of the ordinary to something whose meaning seems to be plain and clear, even though it has no essential connexion with the original word.

## CHAPTER VIII

## THE EVOLUTION OF STANDARD ENGLISH

To mention the subject of Standard English is almost inevitably to invite criticism and controversy. What does one mean by that term; is there, in fact, such a thing; and is it desirable that there should be? These questions have been discussed and debated *ad nauseam* so it is not proposed to go into all the pros and cons once again, for no useful purpose would be served by so doing. Those who disapprove of the idea of a 'standard' language point out that such a language is theoretical rather than real; that each person considers his own particular brand of English to be 'standard' and all deviations from it to be either affectations or dialects; that though, with normally educated people, grammar, and to a large extent vocabulary also, is uniform throughout the country pronunciation varies considerably from locality to locality, and even amongst 'good writers' and others to whom one might reasonably turn for guidance there is often disagreement. What one will regard as slang or barbarism another will admit as part of the genuine vocabulary of English. Words and phrases which to the younger generation are forceful and expressive, to the older are linguistic outrages. There are words over the pronunciation of which the 'authorities' themselves are perpetually wrangling. Amidst such diversity and confusion how is it possible to fix a standard or to pretend that one does or ever can exist? Whom or what are we to take as our criterion of

correctness? Any ruling that we may lay down will be purely arbitrary; and in any case it is unscientific and against all the natural genius of language to imagine that it can be fixed in this way. A standard speech is an artificial speech, and therefore unstable and without vitality. So argue the opponents of Standard English.

Granted all these objections; yet they do not dispose of the question. Every one of them could be challenged and contested, though it is not proposed to contest them here. The great fallacy in them all seems to be that 'standard' speech is being confused with 'standardised' speech. It is true that there is not, and never could be, a standardised English; but there is such a thing as Standard English. It is not easy to define, but we all know what it is, we all realise that it exists, and most of us can recognise it when we hear it, as we can detect deviations from it whenever they occur. It is not rigid or inflexible. Within its framework there is room for a certain amount of variation and variety, and even of local and personal colouring. Like everything that is typically English, it is marked, within limits, by a spirit of tolerance and compromise and strict rigidity is alien to its nature. It accepts alike the Southern long *a* and the Northern short *ä* in such words as *bath*, *past*, *plaster*; though it prefers the accent on the first syllable in *controversy* it will recognise it as permissible to place it on the second if we so desire, (this pronunciation is coming increasingly to be used even by educated people); and although it regards *It is I* as being the grammatically correct form, it does not absolutely rule out *It is me*. We may use any or all of these variations and alternatives and still speak Standard English<sup>1</sup>; but there are certain things

<sup>1</sup> I am fully aware that many would disagree with this broad definition. Wyld, for instance, would not admit so much latitude, but would

which we must not say. The Cockney *line* (for *lane*) is definitely not Standard English—just as definitely as the Yorkshireman's and Lancashireman's pronunciation of *stud* as though it were the past tense of the verb *to stand* is not. It will not recognise *childer* as the plural of *child*, though historically it is more correct than *children*, and we cannot say *Them books are mine* (as there is a tendency to do amongst uneducated folk), or *He was sat by the fire*, as a number of otherwise well spoken people do in the North and the Midlands. In short, we all know that there is a generally accepted form of English that every educated person aims at speaking, from whatever part of the country and from whatever social class he comes; that though it does not impose strict uniformity, so that distinctive regional characteristics are not altogether obliterated, it does stand above the various regional dialects, and that people who speak this are intelligible to each other as they would not be if they spoke in their local variants. This is what we mean by Standard English. It is the linguistic currency of the realm, the Queen's English.

So much, then, by way of explanation of what is meant by Standard English. Next we must say something on why it arose; for it is not, as some folks are apt to imagine, a mere arbitrary invention of a class or a clique that wish to impose their own particular way of speaking upon others. Though as we shall see later, there are very good utilitarian reasons why a standard speech should be cultivated, it has come about mainly as a natural product of certain historical, cultural and social factors. We have already noticed in Chapter III how, as far back as the Anglo-

make a distinction between Received Standard and Modified Standard; but though this may be justified on purely academic grounds, for practical purposes there seems no point in so doing.

Saxon period, the dialect of Wessex gradually became the pre-eminent one and attained to something of the dignity of a literary dialect, chiefly through the accident that Wessex had a cultured and scholarly king in Alfred the Great, who encouraged letters and was himself both author and translator. In the Middle English period Chaucer and a number of contemporary writers gave the East Midland dialect a literary prestige, and the fact that Caxton used the same dialect for his early printed works established it more firmly still. The invention of printing, in fact, was one of the most influential factors making for the emergence of Standard English. It could not, of course, influence pronunciation but it did stabilise, within limits, spelling, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Dialects were still widely used in speech and even in correspondence (see p. 102), but they tended increasingly to be regarded as an inferior sort of English. The particular dialect that was the 'official' dialect of printing attained to a respectability and a prestige that the others did not enjoy, and as printed works circulated far and wide throughout the country, and even abroad, it soon spread beyond its original bounds and became a national tongue, while others were only regional ones.

Now it so happened that the East Midland dialect was also that spoken, with slight modifications, in London, and the political consolidation of England, with the centralisation of government and of national life in London during the time of the Tudor monarchs, not only meant that the need would be increasingly felt for a 'national' language by a people that was becoming more and more conscious of its national unity, but it also helped to assure a supremacy for the English of the capital. The influence of the Authorised Version of the Bible (1611) must also be



taken into consideration, and, about a century and a half later, Dr. Johnson's Dictionary, which performed a double service, viz. (i) it reduced a rather chaotic spelling system to something like order and virtually 'fixed' English spelling from that time onwards; and (ii) by distinguishing between reputable and 'low' words (sometimes rather arbitrarily and capriciously, it is true) it established the notion of a cleavage between what was 'good English' and what was not. Amongst later influences must be counted the increased social contact which modern methods of travel have brought in their train and the spread of reading and of education amongst all classes, with a consequent elevation of Standard English at the expense of regional varieties, advent of wireless and television (at least in their early days). And finally we must not discount the part played by the more utilitarian and conscious influence implicit in the belief at least earlier in this century, that, in these democratic days, if one would 'get on in the world' one must take care to speak good English. *Savoir dire* (to coin a phrase) is just as important as *savoir faire*.

Professor H. C. Wyld, writing some years ago in his *Short History of English*, defined Standard English as that which was 'spoken within certain social boundaries, with an extraordinary degree of uniformity, all over the country'; and it is true that, in all probability, the distinction between those who spoke Standard English and those who did not was originally a social one. To some extent it still is so today. Certainly the old and more rigid social barriers are breaking down, so that in the strict sense Wyld's definition is no longer valid. The son or daughter of a working man may, and very often does, speak as good English as a peer of the realm, so that Standard English

is no longer the monopoly or distinguishing mark of one social class—unless, indeed, we modify the significance of the term and claim that the typist or shop assistant who speaks the same kind of English as the peeress is, *ipso facto*, in the same class, and that possibly the incentive to speaking ‘good English’ is a mild though harmless form of snobbery and social ambition—a desire to gain admittance to that ever-broadening circle. But however we may view the matter, certainly the negative aspect of Wyld’s definition still holds good: the speaking of non-Standard English definitely places a person outside the social class in question. In other words, Standard English carries with it and confers on its speaker a certain social prestige; any other brand of English does the opposite.<sup>1</sup>

Another authority on the English language, Professor Daniel Jones, is more explicit. What we call Standard English, he says, ‘is that most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern England whose men-folk have been educated at the great public schools.’ It will be noticed that he states more definitely than does Wyld what the social class is, and he also adds a qualification as to locality; but again the same objections would seem to apply. Jones, however, though his definition may be rather faulty when judged by the distribution of Standard English at the present day, has hit upon the two most important facts about its origin; viz., it is based on (a) the English of *Southern* England, and (b) the language of the cultured and educated classes of that region.

Why the dialect of the South rather than that of the North should have gained this pre-eminence has been

<sup>1</sup> A fact mentioned by H. A. Mess, in his book, *Social Groups in Modern England* (Nelson Discussion Books No. 73, 1940, pp. 117–118), as being of important social significance.

discussed already; viz., for courtly reasons, reasons of government, trade and commerce, foreign travel, etc. As early as 1589 we find George Puttenham, in his *Art of English Poesie*, advising poets not to 'take the terms of the northern men, nor any speech used beyond the river of Trent. But ye shall take the usual speech of the Court and that of London and the shires lying about London within sixty miles, and not much above.....Herein we are already ruled by the English dictionaries and other books written by learned men, and therefore it needeth none other direction in that behalf.' Puttenham, it is true, was speaking for the written literary language rather than for the spoken word, but where literature led, the speech of polite society followed; and from polite society it slowly but gradually percolated through to the lower strata. It was, of course, influenced in subtle ways by political, religious and social developments, and each age has made its own contribution.

One feels that the debt we owe to the Commonwealth period in the matter of the evolution of a standard language has never been sufficiently recognised. By the fact that it set its face against courtly affectation and cultivated a dignified mode of speech it helped to mould the character of the language for the next two hundred years; and by the emphasis that it placed upon the reading and study of the Bible it did a great deal to combat the earlier tendency towards Latinism and to ensure a predominantly Saxon basis for the mother tongue. If in many respects the Renaissance enriched the language, it also provided the possibility for the emergence of an artificial pseudo-classical style. The development of this was very largely checked by the Puritans. Those Puritans represented the predecessors of the very families whose speech Jones

had in mind when he laid down the definition of Standard English quoted above: the upper middle class, who for two whole centuries were the backbone of England and the most important class socially as well as politically. As their religious and moral outlook influenced English life and thought right up to the end of Queen Victoria's reign, so did the character of their speech influence the future development of the language.

England has never had an Academy of Letters, as France has, but towards the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century many writers felt that there was a need for one so that some standard of language and vocabulary could be fixed by an authoritative body. In this age, the age of the Merry Monarch, of Queen Anne and the first two Georges, with their galaxy of courtiers, politicians and literati, polite society and the world of letters were even more conscious of the distinctiveness of the London and southern dialects than their predecessors had been, and one of the most frequent subjects of ridicule in a number of plays and minor novels of the day was the Yorkshire squire, with his uncouth manners and his barbarous diction. It was felt that a very valuable purpose would be served by defining once for all what was to be considered good English, and giving a ruling on what words were admissible into polite language and what were to be regarded as slang. When Johnson undertook the compilation of his Dictionary he had something of this object in view, but he quickly abandoned it, becoming convinced that such a project was not feasible, and soon he opposed the establishment of any kind of Academy as being alien to the spirit of English liberty. Nevertheless the dictionaries of the eighteenth century did attempt to lay down an approximate standard

in that they not only distinguished between what words might be used by those who wished to be considered 'correct' and what might not, but many of them marked accent and vowel quantities in order to give a guide to pronunciation, about which, apparently, there was still a great deal of doubt and disagreement.

The contribution of the eighteenth century to the development of Standard English, then, is beyond question; but for all that, what it achieved it achieved in spite of itself. The attitude it adopted was one which was fundamentally unsound and unscientific. For the eighteenth century, and especially the first half of it, was the great classical age of English letters. It laid down rules to which literature was expected to conform, and it sought to do the same for language. It believed that the dictionary and the grammar book should be the authorities on 'correctness' and that usage should be made to conform to precept. Writers strove to establish for England a style and a diction worthy of their country and its traditions as the style and diction of Latin were worthy of the traditions of Rome. But the great mistake they made was in assuming that the classical tongues of antiquity, by which they set such store, had remained fixed and static. The eighteenth century was unfortunately deficient in philological knowledge, or such an assumption could never have been made. It believed that Latin and Greek owed their vitality and the immortality of their literature to the fact that they had been standardised, or, as Pope would have put it, 'methodised', and the desire to do the same for the language and literature of their own country was the main motive behind the attempts of a number of authors to establish a 'standard' for English.

The next hundred years was the age of individualism

and *laissez faire*, of the doctrines of evolution and the survival of the fittest, and in these circumstances we should hardly expect the idea of an academy to gain much sympathy. Matthew Arnold, who in many ways had affinities with the mid-eighteenth century rather than with his own generation, flirted with it, but in an essay on *The Literary Influence of Academies* (published in his *Essays in Criticism*, Series I) he finally rejected it. 'An academy quite like the French Academy, a sovereign organ of the highest literary opinion .. we shall hardly have, and we ought not to wish to have it', he wrote; but he was in favour of what he termed 'influential centres of correct information', an ideal which to some extent has since been realised.

The nineteenth century, too, was the great period of English expansion and Empire-building, as well as of commercial development, and these characteristics had a twofold effect upon the language, an effect which was at once broadening and restrictive. The vocabulary was considerably enlarged through foreign contacts, while the development of science and social theory led to new recourse being had to the classical tongues for the formation of words of an academic and technical nature. The abstract element in English became more marked; this was the age when so many of our *-isms* were born. But side by side with this, and partly as a reaction from it, there also arose a movement for the purification of the language by the exclusion of foreign terms and their replacement by words of native origin wherever possible. No doubt the national consciousness which usually accompanies a nascent imperialism, and of which we have recently seen instances in other countries, partly accounts for this development, and partly, too, it is explained by

the renewed reverence for the Bible and 'Bible English' which was so marked a characteristic of the period. To the Victorians the Bible became not only a book of devotion but a text-book for scholars in the day and evening schools. Many a writer, like Ruskin, was steeped and saturated in its style and its phraseology, and people were taught that it was of value not only for its religious and moral precepts but also because it was written in the best, the simplest, the purest and the most euphonious English of all time. Nor must we overlook the influence of the Germanophile tendency which grew up just before the middle of the century through the study of the German philosophers and the writings of Carlyle, and finally through the Queen's marriage to a German prince. True, the classical tradition still dominated the educational system from the grammar schools upwards, but all these factors were counteracting influences.

The movement towards a 'purer' English is seen most markedly in Tennyson, the representative poet of the age. Eschewing words of foreign origin as far as he could, he attempted to give currency to some of the 'good old English words' that had long since become archaic. One thinks of *brand* (sword), *boon*, *purblind*, *spate*, *knave* (in its original sense of *boy*), *deem*, *seer*, *thrall*, etc. If one excludes the words of a religious significance—*chapel*, *cross*, *chancel*—which are of necessity derived from Norman-French, the first dozen lines of *Morte d'Arthur* consist almost entirely of English or at least Germanic words, and the statistics given on page 47 show that on an average about eighty-eight per cent. of Tennyson's diction is of native origin. William Morris, too, with his cult of medievalism and his dislike of innovations in language as in social life, was another of the purists. He went even fur-

ther than Tennyson and suggested that such well established words as *omnibus* and *dictionary* should be replaced by *folkwain* and *word-book*.

Though this purist movement may possibly have had a sobering influence on the development of the language in so far as it tended to preserve the existent predominance of native elements and to check the unnecessary recourse to foreign terms or to the growth of a markedly foreign style, few of the actual revivals were permanent. Morris's drastic reforms were foredoomed to failure, and almost all his coinages proved abortive. Tennyson's gained a limited currency for a while, but were still regarded as poetic eccentricities and never really absorbed into the spoken tongue or even into the diction of written prose. A few words like *handbook* (in place of the older *manual*) and *foreword* (instead of *preface*), which both belong to this period, have survived, but even so they have not ousted the alternative terms.

Now to any language there are four distinct aspects, viz., (i) vocabulary, (ii) spelling, (iii) grammar, and (iv) pronunciation. For obvious reasons the earliest move towards standardisation took place in the first three of these. It is only comparatively recently that pronunciation has become more or less uniform. Of course, there always have been, and there presumably always will be, two tendencies at work: on the one hand the conservative, which is averse to change and looks askance at innovation or too great latitude as being destructive of all that is best and most characteristic in the speech that has been handed down to us by the past; on the other the progressive, which holds that by welcoming innovation we are not only enlarging the bounds and the possibilities of the language, but are actually preserving the spirit and tradition of the



past, since the English tongue has only become what it is today because our ancestors adopted no narrow attitude but were ready to accept and naturalise foreign elements and to tolerate new tendencies in style, grammar and pronunciation. With this clash of opinion is bound up the whole question of the relation between grammar and usage. It is not proposed to debate it here; suffice it to say that the present age seems to have adopted an attitude of compromise, which is, perhaps, the common sense one. While admitting that ultimately precept is determined by practice, grammar by usage, and not *vice versa*, it takes up a position which is still fundamentally conservative, though conservative in an enlightened sense. It will not give way to passing whims and fancies or tolerate arbitrary departures from what has long been accepted as 'correct', but when it is clear that a particular innovation is not merely a passing whim or eccentricity, but has come to stay, it will recognise it as legitimate English. Frequently there is an intermediate stage, when the old and the new are regarded as equally acceptable. Hence the alternative spellings *judgement* and *judgment* and the alternative pronunciations of *controversy*, *respite*, etc. at the present time.

Of recent years there has been a reaction against the idea of Standard English, perhaps as part of the reaction against authority in general, perhaps on the principle that 'Jack is as good as his master'. Then, as a further reaction against this, there arose an interest in 'U' and 'non-U' English. ('U' stands for upper-class, or the aristocracy, and 'non-U' for 'non-upper-class', i.e. the rest of us). *Note-paper* is non-U: the U term is *writing paper*. *Mirror* is non-U; the U speaker uses *looking glass* (except for a driving mirror and a shaving mirror). A U speaker will refer to a *lounge* in a hotel or a club, but not in

a private house. *Coverlet* is non-U; its U equivalent is *counterpane*. Only non-U speakers *take* a bath; a U speaker *has* a bath. *Radio* is non-U; the U equivalent is *wireless*. Interest in the subject was first aroused in 1954, when Professor Alan Ross, of the University of Birmingham, contributed an article on it to the Finnish philological journal *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*. A shortened version of this article later appeared in *Encounter*. Miss Nancy Mitford joined in the discussion, and for a while there was a good deal of argument and controversy. The original article was meant as a social study, not as an indicator of what was linguistically 'correct' and what 'incorrect', though there was at the time a tendency to interpret it in that way. Today we scarcely hear it discussed, though it has given us the use of the terms 'U' and 'non-U' for things other than language. Perhaps the reaction against the idea of Standard English will be similarly short-lived, though if it is, the Standard English of fifty years hence will not be in all respects that of today.

## CHAPTER IX

### IDIOM AND METAPHOR

EVERY language has certain phrases or constructions which, if taken literally, would be meaningless, or which by the normal rules of grammar and syntax are quite inexplicable; yet for all that they are quite good English, French, German, etc., as the case may be. No native has the least difficulty in understanding them and they are so much a part of his daily speech that in all probability he has never noticed that there is anything irregular or peculiar about them. Such phrases are called *idioms*. For instance, French has a construction *faire le diable à quatre*. A literal English translation would give *to make the devil at four*, which, of course, means nothing to us. Yet to a Frenchman that phrase is a very forceful and expressive one; its nearest equivalent in our own language is *to kick up a devil of a row*. This, then, is a French idiom, and there are hundreds more of them.

The word *IDIOM* is of Greek derivation and means 'standing apart on its own' (cf. *idiot*, p. 179). It is, then, a construction which stands apart from the rest of the language on account of this irregularity; but so far as English is concerned it stands apart in a good and numerous company, for a full list of even the commoner of our idioms would extend to many pages; and examination would show that they are almost all of a popular rather than a literary character, belonging to the spoken rather than the written language.

English idioms can be divided into two main types, as follows:

I. *Those which involve a breach of logic.* These constitute the larger and more numerous class, and the illogicality may arise in several ways. There is, for instance, that type which consists of an adjective followed by a preposition apparently chosen quite arbitrarily, since it seems to have no logical connexion with the word to which it is attached. Yet usage dictates that we should use this particular preposition and no other, even though that other should seem to us the more obvious and natural one. A little thought will show us why we must say *different from* and not *different to*. The conception of difference implies a kind of mental or intellectual separation of the things that differ (i.e. they are taken *from* each other) just as the conception of similarity implies an intellectual 'bringing together'. So we say *different from* and *similar to*. In the same way one event is concurrent *with* another and a person is agreeable *to* a proposal (or *vice versa*). In general where a word is compounded with a prefix of classical origin, the preposition which follows is the English equivalent of that prefix. But this is not invariable. Why, in the name of logic, should we talk of one thing being dependent *on* another, since *dependent*, taken literally, means 'hanging from'? And why are we subject *to* illness, etc., when, to be consistent, we should be subject *under*, seeing that the word signifies 'thrown beneath'? Of course, it is quite irrational and illogical, but what of that? It is just a matter of idiom.

Then there are also certain stock phrases (often cast in the form of similes) where all logic seems to be absent. We describe a person as being 'as fit as a fiddle' or 'as bold as brass'. But in what sense can a fiddle be called

fit, or brass bold? Quite clearly in instances like these the guiding principle has been alliteration; whether the comparison is an apt one or not, or, indeed, whether there is really much point in it at all, does not matter.

II. *Those in which a breach of grammar or syntax is involved.* Grammar and usage do not always agree. Whether they should do so is discussed elsewhere in this book (p. 208). The author of *The Ingoldsby Legends* evidently thought they should, since in *The Jackdaw of Rheims* he wrote that,

Regardless of grammar they all cried, 'That's him!'

Yet there is ample precedent and justification for the use of this accusative-complement. According to all grammatical rules, it is true, a subjective complement is in the nominative case, so that we should say, 'It is I', 'It was he', etc.; but in this particular too strict adherence to the dictates of grammar, especially in conversational or spoken English, is apt to savour of pedantry. The idiomatic 'It is me' has by this time become firmly established. Perhaps it is felt that *I* is too weak and insignificant a word to end a sentence, and even more so to stand alone. Thus in answer to the question 'Who is there?' we should never think of replying '*I*'; invariably the answer would be *me*, though on grammatical grounds the former alone can be justified, since the reply is short for *I am*.

Then there is the vexed question of the final preposition. On this grammarians have always tried to be dogmatic, insisting that a preposition should never be placed at the end of a sentence or a clause; and it is true enough that the word itself (*pre*-position) suggests that its right place is before the noun or pronoun that it governs. But here again usage and idiom do not always agree with grammar.

Bring me some string to tie this parcel up with ' is surely as good English as anyone could desire, and is certainly less clumsy and stilted than ' . . . with which to tie up this parcel ', the construction which, presumably, the orthodox grammarian would have us use. The advice given by Fowler's *Modern English Usage* seems to be as sensible as any.

' Follow no arbitrary rule, but remember that there are often two or more possible arrangements between which a choice should be consciously made. If the abnormal, or at least unorthodox, final preposition that has naturally presented itself sounds comfortable, keep it; if it does not sound comfortable, still keep it if it has compensating vigour, or when among awkward possibilities it is the least awkward '.

In other words, use your discretion and sense of euphony. Conform where possible, but if you honestly feel that there is a case for nonconformity, then be a nonconformist, even at the risk of being declared a heretic.

And with this question of the final preposition is bound up another, that of the case of the noun or pronoun which it governs. How many of us would say ' Whom did you give it to?', as we should do to be grammatically correct and consistent, since the initial pronoun is still governed by the preposition, in spite of the fact that the two are so widely separated? Fowler insists that, in writing at least, we must be careful to preserve this strict accusative; but the fact remains that though this form may be ' good grammar ' it is far from euphonious and strikes one as unnatural or forced (possibly because of the absence of the preposition before the pronoun). If a census were taken it would probably be found that the great majority, even of educated speakers, preferred and habitually used the

idiomatic 'Who did you give it to?'<sup>1</sup> So far as written English is concerned, however, perhaps Fowler is right, for the written language has always been more conservative than the oral, and there is good reason why it should be; it acts as a brake against a too rapid down-hill tendency. But if we may judge from the past history of the language, it has frequently been the case that what is good spoken English today becomes good written English tomorrow.

As a final example of grammatical (or rather ungrammatical) idiom we may take the case of singular collective nouns with plural verbs. Should one say, 'The committee is. ...' or 'The committee are ...'? Grammar says the former; usage has made the latter equally acceptable. It may, of course, be replied that which form we use depends upon the way in which we regard the committee. If we think of it as one body, acting as a homogeneous whole, we treat it as singular, but if, on the other hand, we think of it as some score or so of individual persons, each acting independently within the body and making his own contribution to its work and its deliberations, then we treat it as plural. Or again it may be argued that the notion underlying the verb to which such a noun is attached will serve as a guide. Thus when we talk of a committee's resolving or deciding something we are treating it as a collective whole, and consequently there is here a singular sense; but when, on the other hand, we speak of a committee's meeting there is a plural notion, since one thing cannot meet. So while we may say,

'The committee has decided.....',

<sup>1</sup> The precisian, of course, would say, '*To whom did you give it?*', when the difficulty does not arise.

we should say,

‘ The committee have (not *has*) met ’

This line of argument is, no doubt, sound enough, but it will not suit the orthodox grammarian, for it is exalting logic and common sense above grammar, and is, within limits, making each man his own grammarian.

A case of the same kind, but where rigid adherence to grammatical rules is even more patently impossible, is to be found in the construction of the type:

A number of people were killed.

Again, it is good idiomatic English; but it is not grammatical. Since the real subject of the sentence is *a number* (singular) the auxiliary verb should be *was*. But such precision would be both offensive to our sense of euphony and contrary to the meaning of the sentence, which is certainly plural and not singular. In the case of *flock*, *herd*, etc., one can think of a single body and visualise it as a whole, but it is impossible to think of a number save by thinking of the separate individuals that compose it; so once again grammar gives way to idiom and common sense.

A point of particular interest, where idiomatic practice effects a subtle but important distinction in meaning, centres on the use or non-use of the definite article in certain constructions involving the verb *to go*. We go to church (no definite article) but to *the* cathedral; to college (no definite article) but to *the* University (though *go to university* is heard with increasing frequency nowadays). The construction without the article also occurs in the following: *to go to school*, *to lectures*, *to class*, *to chapel*, *to service* (either domestic service or a church service), *to meeting* (at a Quaker meeting-house), *to choir-practice*, *to rehearsal*, *to hospital*, *to*



*prison, to war, to battle, to sea, to business, to town, to market, to football, cricket, tennis, golf, breakfast, dinner, tea, etc.* No doubt the list could be extended as the result of a little thought.

Now it will be noticed that in all the cases cited above there is also a corresponding form *with* the definite article; but the omission or inclusion of this article makes a difference to the meaning of the phrase in question. When, then, do we omit it and when do we include it? After careful consideration of all the examples the following has seemed to the present writer to be the answer. We omit the article when we are thinking primarily not of the object or the thing named, but of some activity or function normally connected with it, so that the phrase carries a certain verbal sense. If the article is inserted, on the other hand, there is no such transference of meaning. When we say we are going to church or to chapel we mean that we are going to take part in the worship, but to go to *the* church is merely to go to the building. A pupil or a teacher goes to school (i.e. to learn or to teach), but a parent or an inspector goes to *the* school; a patient goes to hospital (for treatment), a visitor, tradesman, etc., to *the* hospital; a criminal goes to prison (the idea of punishment), but a prison-visitor to *the* prison. To go to *the* market merely implies going to the place where the market is held, but to go to *market* suggests that one goes with the intention of transacting business there. And so we can go through the rest of the list.

The construction with the article omitted is, however, limited to a certain number of phrases; in others, even though the primary idea is that of function or activity, it must be inserted. Thus we always go to *the* cathedral, *the* abbey, etc., even when we go to take part in the service

there and not merely as a sightseer; and we go to *the* University, though the idea of study is present just as much as it is when we speak of going to college (with the article omitted). We must also speak of going to *the* theatre, *the* cinema, *the* office, etc.; and while we omit the article in the phrase *to go to town* (implying some purpose in so doing), if it is the country or the seaside that is concerned, we must always put it in. There is doubtless some reason behind this distinction, but what it is no one seems yet to have discovered.<sup>1</sup>

Like English proverbs, English idiomatic phrases are concerned mainly with ordinary life, not with abstract thought or with things intellectual. They say what they have to say in concrete imagery, and they reflect a mentality which sets great store by worldly success and worldly wisdom; few of them have any relation to things moral or spiritual. Most are of great antiquity and enshrine not only words which have now become obsolete, but an attitude to life and conduct which is pre-eminently a practical one, born of the common folk. Logan Pearsall Smith (*Words and Idioms*) classifies them under six heads, as follows:

<sup>1</sup> I have tried to formulate a rule myself, but have been unable to do so. The usual authorities yield no information and a number of well-known German, Swiss and Dutch scholars whom I have consulted confess themselves baffled. In the case of *cathedral* we could, no doubt, say that the reference is to the building and not to the service that is conducted there, and it is not impossible for us to speak of going to church (and certainly to service) at the cathedral or at the abbey. A case for *the University* might be made out on similar lines: the phrase goes back to the days when there were only two Universities in England, so that the sense of place was much more definite than it is today. But the same cannot be said of the other constructions.

(i) *Those which depend upon a conjunction of similar ideas*, e.g. fear and trembling, beck and call, hammer and tongs, dust and ashes, meat and drink, might and main, etc.

(ii) *Those which depend upon opposed ideas, often presented as alternatives*, e.g. more or less, hit or miss, sooner or later, great and small, high and low, far and near, up hill and down dale, heads or tails, willy nilly, first and last, the long and the short.

(iii) *Those which depend upon alliteration*. Kith and kin, rack and ruin, chop and change, rhyme and reason, dilly-dally, shilly-shally, few and far, might and main, neck or nothing.

(iv) *Those which constitute a comparison based on alliteration*. Fit as a fiddle, bold as brass, dead as a doornail, as large as life, flat as a flounder, as green as grass, as red as a rose, as cold as charity.

Note, as has been stated earlier, that there is not always any logical point in the comparison.

(v) *Those which depend on rhyme*. Fair and square, high and dry, wear and tear, by hook or by crook.

(vi) *Those which are examples of repetition*. By and by, more and more, through and through.

To these may be added the following:

(a) *Those which are comparisons showing popular beliefs or prejudices*. As rich as a Jew, as poor as a church mouse, to swear like a trooper, to drink like a fish, as drunk as a lord, as ugly as a witch.

(b) *Those which reflect common experiences or observations, or arise from daily life and occupations*. As fat as a pig, as thin as a rake (or a rail), as hungry as a hunter, as merry as a lark, as happy as a sandboy, etc. As regards the last phrase, the dictionary defines a sandboy as 'a boy who carted round sand for sale.' Why such a person should have been remarkable for his happiness it is not easy to see.

This is a rough and approximate classification; note that some idioms could be placed in more than one of the classes.

Closely allied to idiom is metaphor: not the literary metaphor which is intellectual in character and the outcome of a keen perceptive power, but those simpler, everyday metaphorical expressions which have become so much a part of the ordinary vocabulary of English that they are themselves almost idiomatic in force: and not only phrases, but even single words, for a very large part of language is fundamentally metaphorical, and many words which we have been in the habit of considering literal and primary ones are actually used figuratively, even in their ordinarily accepted sense. Especially is this so with words of Latin derivation. When, for instance, we speak of expressing our meaning or expressing our thanks to someone, though few of us realise it we are employing a metaphor, since *to express* means *to press out*, just as *to impress* means *to press in*. *Astound* and *astonish* rarely call up in our minds any association with thunder, *disaster* no longer suggests a malign planetary influence, and when we say that a fact is obvious we do not readily conceive of it as coming to meet us. Yet by derivation that is what all these words signify. To become involved in a conspiracy is to get 'rolled into' it, a sanguine disposition is one produced by a superfluity of blood, a superstition is something which stands over us, and to impute a suggestion to someone is to 'graft' it on to him as a slip from one tree is grafted on to another. The verb *to test* takes us back to the days of alchemy, when substances were tried in a pot, or *testa* (cf. the modern test tube)—hence the origin of the verb; *to differ* means literally 'to bear apart' (*dis*=apart, *ferre*=to bear), while *to inspire* means 'to breathe into', as

*to expire* means to 'breathe out'. The verb *to conspire*, a particularly picturesque and vivid metaphor, suggesting as it does a number of plotters with their heads laid close to each other, breathing together in whispers. The list could, of course, be extended almost indefinitely, but these few examples will suffice. We may call them unconscious metaphors. They are, that is to say, symbolic in character, expressing an abstract notion through a concrete and often a visual imagery, but there has been no deliberate and conscious transference of meaning from the literal to the metaphorical plane. The recognition of such a resemblance goes deep down into man's subconscious mind, and its symbolic expression is a semi-spontaneous one, reflecting a native and primitive tendency to think in images.

Then there are also a number of common words which are consciously metaphorical in meaning, at least as they are used today. Some of these have already been treated at an earlier stage of the book (pp 174-8). Unlike those in the previous class, they first came into the language in their literal sense; then they acquired a figurative application, and in course of time this usurped the place of the original one, so that now, when we employ these terms, though second thoughts will usually tell us that we are using metaphors, the tendency is to regard this metaphorical use as the primary one. Frequently the literal sense of the word exists alongside the figurative one, but has become subsidiary to it in order of importance and frequency of use. The cases of *thrill*, *outpost* and *bias* have been cited already (pp. 53, 176-7). Another is *ruminate*. Literally it means *to chew the cud*, and at one time could be used only of a cow; but in modern idiom this sense of it, though still recognised, is secondary to that of turning over in one's mind thoughts which have already been

turned over several times before. The process resembles that of the cow with the cud: hence the appropriateness of the metaphor. Or take the noun *habit*, connected etymologically with the Latin verb *habere*, (to have). The more frequent use of it in modern English is to denote some small action which we perform repeatedly and unthinkingly, in mechanical fashion; but there is also a second meaning, viz, a garment or coat. Chronologically the latter of these two was the earlier. the other is a figurative use, for an acquired peculiarity of behaviour is, as it were, a kind of garment which we put on and which distinguishes us just as much as does a particular style of coat or dress.

Many are the instances in which the metaphorical sense has thus come to usurp the place of the literal, and in some cases even to displace the literal meaning altogether. *Layman*, *orthodox* and *heretic* still keep their original religious significance, but with the decline of interest in religious controversy all three have been appropriated to secular purposes, so that we speak of medical facts well known to all doctors but to few laymen; or we refer to a person as holding unorthodox views on economics or heretical opinions on grammar. *Comfort* (to make strong) has long since passed from the physical to the emotional and psychological sphere, and few of us now remember that the earliest meaning of *pioneer* was one of a band who went in front of an advancing army to clear a way for it through woods and forests.<sup>1</sup> *Zenith* and *nadir*, both astrological terms, are at present usually employed in reference to the growth and decline of one's power or reputation. *Circumstances* are the things which stand around one, while *exempt* means, literally, 'bought out' (Lat. *ex*=out; *emptum*=bought).

<sup>1</sup> A temporary revival of the military sense came about with the war of 1939-45 and the frequent reference to the Pioneer Corps.

The fact that nowadays it signifies the granting of immunity by legal means is something of a reflexion on the workings of the law and the power of money in former times.<sup>1</sup> To *salute* someone is to inquire after his health (Lat. *salus*=health), though in the modern military or political salute, of course, such inquiries have no place; a *docile* person is one who is teachable, hence amenable to discipline or easily manageable; and to *exonerate* one is to lift a burden from him (Lat. *onus*, plural *onera*=burden). A word of particular interest is *post*, which shows a succession and accumulation of metaphorical applications. The basis of it is *positum*, the past participle of the Latin verb *ponere* (to place). A post, that is to say, was originally and by derivation something placed in a fixed spot. In this sense it is to be found applied to a military post and to a gate-post, lamp-post, etc. In earlier times inns were used as posts (or stations), where travellers could hire, change and fodder their beasts, and the horses which did the journey, because they went from post to post became known as post-horses. Later they were replaced by post-coaches and post-chaises. And then came a strange development in the history of the word. Because the post-horses and post-coaches were remarkable for their speed, the term *post-haste* was coined, and the word which at one time meant *stationary* or *fixed* came to express an idea directly the opposite. Now one of the functions of the post-coach was to carry mail, which it picked up at specified points on the route, and because of this the mail itself ultimately became known as the post,<sup>2</sup> and the established offices from which

<sup>1</sup> Until recently in many countries where conscription for military service or training was in force one could literally obtain exemption by the payment of a certain sum of money.

<sup>2</sup> Though as most people know, *mail* has been retained in America,

it was collected, post offices. Then followed the verb *to post*, and later still the name *postman* was given to the person who collected the letters for despatch and delivered them on their arrival. Here again there is an anomaly, for a postman, far from remaining stationary, is one of the peripatetic servants of the public. Even this, however, does not exhaust the meanings of this one word. There are at least half a dozen others, all from the same root.

Such words as those we have just been discussing show the natural and widespread tendency, as we have said before, to think in images and analogies; and this is still more evident in those metaphorical phrases proper in which the English language abounds. For the fact is that we use metaphor much more frequently than we suppose. If only it were possible for someone to take a shorthand report of our daily conversation, and we could sit down to study it after he had recorded what we had said in, shall we say, one hour, we should be surprised at the number of metaphors we should find in it. We tell someone we have a bone to pick with him, or warn him that he is skating on thin ice; we accuse a friend of letting the cat out of the bag or we tell him to pocket his dignity; we promise to turn over a new leaf or confess that we are at the end of our tether, and every time we are using a metaphor. Phrases and expressions like these are part and parcel of our daily vocabulary. Many of them, it is true, are colloquial, but they express in a striking and picturesque way ideas which very often could not adequately be conveyed by any other means, and our language would be the poorer without

whence it has tended to reappear in English during the last few years. It may be noticed in passing that this also is a figurative use, since the word originally meant *a bag* (French, *malle*) and then came to signify the contents of the bag



them. Indeed, they have probably arisen and persisted because they were felt to supply a need.

These phrases come from a variety of sources, of which the following are the chief, though the list is by no means exhaustive; and of course countless other examples could be given under each head.

(i) *Parts of the body.* Set one's face against; set one's teeth on edge; clench one's teeth; turn a deaf ear; close the eyes; see eye to eye; turn up the nose; point the finger; turn one's back; an itching palm; grease the palm; rub shoulders; elbow room; cheek by jowl.

(ii) *Birds and animals and their habits.* Feather one's nest; an unlicked cub; ride the high horse; ride a hobby horse; a bee in one's bonnet; smell a rat; go to the dogs; a dog's life; let sleeping dogs lie; a swan song; flog a dead horse; the bone of contention; a pig in a poke; a cock and bull story; a bull in a china shop; the cuckoo in the nest; a snake in the grass.

(iii) *Daily occupations and experiences.* Grist to the mill; put the shoulder to the wheel; hit the nail on the head; nail a lie; a bolt from the blue; by hook or by crook; a black sheep; cut the coat according to the cloth; cold comfort; set one's house in order; sow wild oats; make a rod for one's own back; a busman's holiday; put the cart before the horse; nip in the bud.

(iv) *Superstitions.* The devil to pay; crocodile tears; a happy hunting ground; on the cards; thank your lucky stars; ill-starred.

(v) *Sports and pastimes.* Skate on thin ice; beat about the bush; within an ace; draw a red herring across the track; queer one's pitch; hunt with the hounds and run with the hare; ride the high horse; hit below the belt; draw the long bow; have two strings to one's bow; check-

mate, the die is cast, cross swords; take up the cudgels; a sprat to catch a mackerel; put one's cards on the table, play one's trump card.

(vi) *The sea* Davy Jones's locker, strike one's colours; trim one's sails to the wind; pour oil on troubled waters; clear the decks

(vii) *The army and warfare.* Stuck to one's guns, burn one's boats; a turncoat, take French leave, a diehard; a flash in the pan; take the King's shilling, marching orders; hurl a bombshell, sell the pass; hold the fort.

(viii) *Agriculture and farming.* Plough a lonely furrow; sow seeds of discord; a windfall; reap a harvest; temper the wind to the shorn lamb.

(ix) *The Church and religion* The devil's advocate; a work of supererogation; the odour of sanctity; a red-letter day

(x) *The Bible.* A whited sepulchre; kill the fatted calf; a prodigal son, Job's comforter; a Jeremiah; a Jonah, a Philistine, a pharisaical attitude, cast pearls before swine; a house divided against itself, a Sabbath day's journey; the scales fell from his eyes, kick against the pricks, separate the sheep from the goats, an abigail, the old Adam, a Goliath, hide one's candle under a bushel, bury one's talents, tell it not in Gath, manna in the desert, go into the wilderness; a wolf in sheep's clothing; a Saul amongst the prophets, the alpha and omega, reap the whirlwind, strain at a gnat.

(xi) *Literature.* As with the popularisation of words, so with the introduction of metaphorical phrases and expressions, literature has made its contribution. But again, it is not so much to the best writers as to the best known and the most widely read that we are indebted. A phrase only becomes a household word when it is familiar to a wide circle of people, and it can only be used and understood

intelligently by those who are familiar with the source from which it is derived. As we should expect, the Bible has given us many more than any other book in the language. A number also come from the classics, though now that familiarity with the classical writers is on the decline they are less used than they used to be. Amongst English writers the most frequently quoted are Shakespeare and Dickens, and legends like those of the *Arabian Nights* have also made their contribution. The following are typical examples.

(a) *The Classics*. A Herculean task; the heel of Achilles; cleanse the Augean stables; a sop to Cerberus; the sword of Damocles; between Scylla and Charybdis; sow the dragon's teeth.

(b) *Shakespeare*. Have one's pound of flesh; hoist with his own petard; a Shylock; an itching palm; patience on a monument; household words; Falstaffian dimensions; there's the rub; more sinned against than sinning; the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

(c) *Dickens*. A Pecksniff; a Wellerism; a Pickwickian sense; a Micawber; Bumbledom, Bill Sikes, the Circumlocution Office.

(d) *Legend and fable*. The old man of the sea; Open Sesame!; between the devil and the deep sea; the lion's share; a catpaw; the dog in the manger; kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

(e) *Other literary sources*. A Utopian scheme; a Don Juan; tilt at windmills; lilliputian proportions; the haven under the hill; a Vicar of Bray; the Slough of Despond; Vanity Fair.

(xii) *Anecdotes*. Hobson's choice; have an axe to grind; the last straw; sit on the fence; the curate's egg; a George Washington.

(xiii) *Historical personages, occasions and dicta.* Read the riot act; a blue-stocking; cross the Rubicon; a scrap of paper; a pyrrhic victory; cut the Gordian knot; a leap in the dark; the great unwashed; a place in the sun; Bismarckian tactics; a nation of shopkeepers

(xiv) *Imagination.* Break the ice, build castles in the air; burn the candle at both ends, a fly in the ointment; a bee in one's bonnet; a dead letter; play second fiddle; a wet blanket; a fool's paradise; set on a pedestal; carry coals to Newcastle, fly off at a tangent; keep the wolf from the door; split hairs; a straw in the wind; a skeleton in the cupboard; miss the wood for the trees; a storm in a teacup, have one's head in the clouds; a left-handed compliment.

Phrases like these, though not so frequent as individual words, are not mere creations of the past; they are still being made today. One is *the fifth column*, a term which became very familiar in the early days of the war of 1939-45 in reference to organisations working treacherously and secretly within a country with the intent of betraying it to the enemy. It originated during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-38, when General Mola, advancing on Madrid with four columns, said that he placed equal reliance upon the loyalty and determination of the fifth column, that within the city itself. The fifth column in question amply justified his opinion of it.

Certain of these metaphorical phrases, like quotations and proverbs, are liable to become corrupted and misunderstood, and several of our commoner and better known dicta have, in fact, suffered this fate. An example is the familiar expression *to spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar*, which actually is not a nautical metaphor at all, but one from sheep-farming. *Ship* is a corruption of *sheep* and the tar

is that used to prevent foot-rot    *To eat humble pie* has been discussed already (p. 194).    *A regiment of women* refers not to a band or company of female warriors, but to government by women, while the verb *prove* in the dictum *the exception proves the rule* is synonymous with *test*, the assertion is certainly not that a rule is proved sound and infallible by the exceptions to it. That would make sheer nonsense; yet many a person has attempted to give it that significance

## CHAPTER X

### THE FOREIGN CONTRIBUTION

As has been pointed out at an earlier stage, English is far from being a pure tongue. Its basis is Anglo-Saxon, but there are also in it substantial elements of Scandinavian, French and Latin, while at various periods of its history it has absorbed words from most of the languages of Europe and also from some of those spoken in the other four continents. A number of these terms are still recognisably foreign, but many also have become so essential a part of our vocabulary that we never think of them as anything but English. The technical term for these words which have been adopted from foreign tongues is **LOAN WORDS**—not a good description, since a loan implies an obligation to repay, and in the case of language no such obligation exists or is recognised, though it may be mentioned in passing that if foreign languages have given much to English, English elements are also to be found in many foreign tongues, though not to nearly so great an extent.<sup>1</sup>

Loan-words have come into the language by three chief means: viz.

(a) *They may have been brought by foreign invaders who settled here.* As we have seen in an earlier chapter, the greater part of our Scandinavian words came in this way; so did a few early Latin terms and a large proportion of

<sup>1</sup> On this subject see a paper entitled 'The English Element in Foreign Languages' in L. Pearsall Smith's *Words and Idioms* (1925)

the French element which is to be found in the two centuries immediately following the Norman Conquest. Words introduced in this fashion usually pass into the spoken language first and then are adopted by the literary language, though many, naturally, become obsolete before ever they can be perpetuated in writing.

(b) *They may come through foreign contacts originating in war, exploration, trade, travel, etc.* This was the case with most of the Spanish words which form part of our vocabulary, and also with the majority of terms from the East. Again it is the spoken language which benefits first.

(c) *They may come through scholarship, learning and culture.* In this case it is usual for them to appear first of all in the written tongue and thence to pass into the spoken language. This was the method by which the greater percentage of the Latin words which were added during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were introduced; so were a number of Italian words, and those from Arabic which refer to medieval science and learning. Quite a number of this class, of course, have never really become popular words, having remained part of the literary rather than the spoken vocabulary.

Anything like a comprehensive treatment of the loan words in English is obviously impossible in a single chapter of a book which is itself only an introduction to the study of the English language as a whole. Anyone who wishes to go into the subject more fully is referred to Dr. Mary S. Serjeantson's *History of Foreign Words in English* (1935). All that can be attempted here is to indicate the main sources of such borrowings and the nature of the words which we have taken over from particular languages, and to cite a few typical examples of each, confining ourselves as far as possible to words that are still a living and active

part of our vocabulary. But before we do this there are one or two general points which we should seek to clarify.

First of all we must realise that many foreign words have been borrowed at second or even at third hand; that is to say, they have passed through another language first and we have then adopted them from this intermediary tongue. Thus a number of Latin words, particularly those connected with the Church and the legal profession, came to us via French, so did certain Arabic terms. The question arises, then, are we to consider such words as these as having been borrowed from the Latin and Arabic respectively, or ought we to call them French loan-words? Or take the now thoroughly English word *poet*. It was unknown within these shores before the Conquest. The native term was *scop* ('shaper' or 'maker'). The immediate and direct source of *poet* was Norman-French (cf. Mod. Fr. *poète*), but before it was French it was the Latin *poeta*. Even Latin, however, had adopted it from Greek (*poietes*, with approximately the same meaning as the Anglo-Saxon *scop*). Now is this to be regarded as a Greek, a Latin or a French borrowing? Clearly we must decide on some principle, and to do this is not an easy matter. The best line to adopt seems to be this: where a loan-word had already, at the time of its adoption into English, become an essential part of an intermediate tongue and was not felt by that tongue to be foreign, we had better regard it as coming to us from the intermediate source. But in the case of those words which still had not been properly absorbed, we had better call them borrowings from the original. Thus we should regard *poet* as a French loan-word; but such a term as *alb*, which was used almost entirely in ecclesiastical circles and would probably be associated inevitably in the minds



of the clerics (who were as familiar with Latin as they were with French) with *albus* (white), is a Latin borrowing. This, after all, is consistent with our usual attitude to foreign words after they have been adopted into our own language. Thus *fine* we regard as an English word; it has become acclimatised and naturalised, so that to call it French would be absurd; but terms like *éclat*, which have a restricted use and are still recognisably foreign, are treated differently, being usually printed in italics to indicate that they are not an accepted part of the English language.

This, then, is the first point upon which we should be clear; and secondly we must distinguish between those words on the one hand which, whether they have become naturalised or whether they still bear the foreign stamp, have become a definite and indispensable part of the vocabulary of English in that they are employed with reference to things English or to express ideas which are common to many countries; and, on the other hand, those which, though fairly well known to the average Englishman, are used only in reference to some person, institution or idea connected with their place of origin. The words in this latter class cannot really be called loan-words in the true sense. Thus Mussolini was called by the Italians the *Duce* (the Leader) and in Germany Hitler was similarly called the *Führer*. Both words were freely used in English newspapers of the time and were scarcely felt to be foreign. Yet they would never have been applied to anyone else but the two persons in question. It is the same with *Kaiser*, *Cæsar*, *Tsar*, *Mikado*, etc., and also with *Begum*, *coolie*, *fakir*, etc. Everyone knows what they mean, but their application is confined to the one particular country where they originated. On the other hand, such a word as *kindergarten* is

not employed exclusively of schools in Germany; it stands for a certain type of school wherever it is found just as *serviette* has become a synonym for the older expression *table-napkin*, not merely for a particular kind used in France. Clearly these last two examples have become English in a way that the others have not. Generally speaking, it is only this type that we shall consider here.

Then there arises the question of the pronunciation of loan-words. Again it is difficult to lay down a hard and fast rule or to make any pronouncement that will cover all cases, but broadly we may say that with the more familiar languages (the classical tongues, French, German and Spanish) it is usual to retain the native pronunciation, (or something nearly akin to it) at first, though in the course of time an anglicising tendency sets in in certain words. When this begins it is usually a definite sign that they have ceased to be regarded as foreign and become fully accepted as English. In the case of the less familiar languages, however, (e.g. Arabic, Celtic, Russian, the languages of India, etc.) an anglicised pronunciation is often employed from the very beginning.<sup>1</sup> And the same principle is followed in the matter of plurals, though here the class which we have called 'the more familiar languages' is more restricted. Generally we may say that those words which have been taken over direct from the classical tongues and from French retain their own original plurals; those from other languages form the plural by the addition of an *s*, on the analogy of the great majority of English

<sup>1</sup> Though in recent times the influence of broadcasting has sometimes tended to bring about a reversion to something nearer the native pronunciation. For instance, up to the 1960s the word *sheik* (of Arabic origin) had usually been pronounced as *sheek*; now the pronunciation *shake* is often heard and is the form used in B.B.C. news bulletins

words. Thus we have from the Greek *phenomenon*, *phenomena*; *criterion*, *criteria*, etc.: from Latin *terminus*, *termini*; *formula*, *formulae*; *stratum*, *strata*, etc.: from the French *fableaux*, *portmanteaux*, etc. The reason for the distinction is obvious. Until recently all educated Englishmen knew the classical languages and, to a lesser extent, French, so that any kind of 'false plural' in words from these sources would be offensive to them. For long, no doubt, these terms were regarded not as English but as foreign words and they were given the correct foreign plurals accordingly. But with the other languages—even German, Italian and Spanish—they were far less familiar, and so, being ignorant of the native plurals, they coined English ones. In a few cases there are alternatives, one the original and the other an 'English'. *Index*, for instance, makes the plural *indices* when it is used in the scientific or mathematical sense, but *indexes* when used of books and documents, *seraph* and *cherub* retain their Hebrew plurals (*seraphim* and *cherubim*) in the more scholarly religious writers, who may be presumed to have a knowledge of Hebrew, but for all ordinary purposes the forms are *seraphs* and *cherubs*. Even many of the classical words which have ceased to be learned, like those cited above, and have become part of the everyday vocabulary of the average person, have discarded their Latin or Greek plurals in favour of an English one. Thus we say *crocuses*, *syllabuses*, *villas*, *irises*, *nasturtiums*, *omens*, etc., not *croci*, *syllabi*, *villae*, *irides*, *nasturtia*, *omina*, etc., as we should do if we retained the original forms. And finally it may be mentioned that there are a few cases where Latin plurals have come to be treated as singulars, because the real singular form is rarely, if ever, used in English: e.g. *agenda*, *data*, *stamina*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the case of *stamina* the singular, *stamen*, is, of course, used in the

The most important foreign contributions have come from Latin, French and the Scandinavian tongues, so we will proceed to deal with these three before passing on to other languages.

On the Latin element it is not necessary to say a great deal, since it has already been dealt with, in the main, at various stages in the earlier part of the book (pp. 36-9, 90). We will therefore content ourselves with a recapitulation and a clarification of the material.

Latin words in English fall under six main heads, according to the time and the manner in which they were introduced. They are as follows:

(i) Those which came in as a result of the Roman invasion of Britain in 55 B.C. and the occupation of the island up to A.D. 410, a period of almost five hundred years. During this time a fair number of Latin words must have found their way into the Celtic tongue of the native Britons, but most of them suffered the same fate as that tongue itself when the Roman withdrawal was followed by the incursion of the Germanic tribes. They were probably chiefly of a military or popular character. We have noticed the word *win* (wine) from the Latin *vinum*, *weall* (wall) from *vallum* and *ceaster* (camp) from *castra*. There are also a few river names (like Medway = *media via*), those place-names ending in *-caster* and *-chester*, and (an almost pure Latin combination) the name of the town of Pontefract in Yorkshire, which signifies 'broken bridge'.

botanical sense, when the plural is *stamens*. This is one of the rare cases where the classical plural has been preserved for ordinary use and the scientist has adopted an anglicised plural.

(ii) Latin terms which came in with the invading Angles and Saxons, having already become part of the common Germanic stock of words through the Roman conquest of Europe before those tribes left the Continent. Such are the Anglo-Saxon *deofol* (devil) from *diabolus* and *niht* (night) cf. Latin *nox* (*noct*-). Miss Serjeantson, in an appendix to the book mentioned above, lists about a hundred and seventy words in this category, ranging over a variety of types and subjects; but on the basis of our definition of loan-words given at the beginning of the chapter we must exclude the majority of these, as they had already become part and parcel of the continental Saxon vocabulary at the time of the invasion.

(iii) Words introduced direct from Latin during the Anglo-Saxon period, through the early Christian missionaries. These, naturally, are for the most part terms connected with religion. They are supplemented, a little later on, by other words which appear in religious writings. There are, for instance, *cruc* (cross) from the Latin *crux*, which took the place of, though it by no means ousted, the native term *rod* (rood). There were also *candel* (candle), *crēda* (creed), *cometa* (comet), *idol* (idol), *sanct* (saint) and *cleric* (clergyman). In this period Miss Serjeantson lists almost 250 words. But as in the two previous classes, a very large number of them never survived to the Middle English period, being replaced after the Conquest by words of Norman-French origin.

(iv) In the Middle English period (i.e. c. 1100–1500) there were other introductions from Latin, mainly in the spheres of religion, law, medicine and alchemy, and also a number of abstract terms. But very many of these were only second-hand loans, through French, so that they do not count as Latin in the same sense as do

those with which we have dealt previously. See pp. 30-6.)

(v) The great period of the Latin influx was at the time of the Renaissance, especially during the period 1550-1600 (see pp. 90-1). The rebirth of classical scholarship led almost inevitably to the enrichment of the language by a multitude of words derived from the language spoken by Cicero, Cæsar, Vergil and Ovid. And for the main part there was nothing so pedantic about this process as would appear at first sight. It must be remembered that these scholars read, spoke and wrote Latin as easily and as naturally as their own tongue. Many of them were clerics, and to these Latin was their primary language, English merely a workaday, secondary one. Many of the important religious and philosophical treatises of the time, like More's *Utopia* (1516), were first published in Latin, not in the vernacular, and where this was not the case, more than once do we find the author apologising for his use of English and for the consequent cramping effect it has had on his style. It was therefore but natural that when these scholars found the resources of the native tongue inadequate they should go to Latin to find (or to make) a word that would supply their need. To them there would be nothing affected, pedantic or strange about this. It is substantially the same method as that used by the Englishman in Paris, who, finding himself 'stuck' for a French word, fills up the blank with the English term or endeavours to coin one on the analogy of English.

At first, obviously, the new words thus introduced were essentially part of the learned vocabulary, but in the course of time many of them have become popular. Examples are almost too numerous to quote. Here, however, are a

few typical ones: *genius, miser, medium, senior, junior, area, exit, animal, circus, terminus, specimen, omen, pauper, interim, axis, premium, census, series, species, gratis, apparatus, curriculum*. In all these cases, and in many others, Latin words were adopted unaltered; but there are an even larger number which underwent anglicisation (as *secure* and *compute*), and still others which were made up from Latin elements though no actual Latin equivalent existed. Under the influence of the classical tradition of English education this process has been going on ever since 1600, but not nearly to the same extent.

(vi) Finally we have those Latin terms or expressions which have, for the most part, never really become part of current English proper, either being reserved for academic or technical purposes, or falling into the category of slang and witticism. This class may be subdivided as follows:

(a) Latin words taken over unaltered for academic or learned use: e.g. *radius, dictum, quantum, vacuum, apex, suggestio falsi, locum tenens*.

(b) Latin phrases which have a specialised use, though they are sometimes employed apart from their specialised context, when they savour of pedantry: e.g. *ab initio, ex cathedra, prima facie, a fortiori, ipso facto, vice versa, mutatis mutandis*.

(c) Initial words of Latin formulae: e.g. *credo, paternoster, habeas corpus* (for a fuller list, see p. 120). One of the few of this type which has become popular is *recipe*. The word is actually a Latin verb in the imperative mood, meaning *take*, and in the Middle Ages always began instructions for the compounding of medicines. *Recipe* (take)....; then followed a list of ingredients. Hence the formula itself came to be known as a recipe. The transference of the term from pharmacy to cookery illustrates a quite natural

process which, as we have seen, has affected many other words.

(d) Latin words which have been taken to make patent names, especially for medicines and foods (For details, see p. 140.)

(e) Latin compounds, or words derived from Latin sources and elements, for scientific purposes or to name new inventions, etc., e.g. *locomotive*, *tractor*, *motor*, *velocipede* (the old name for a bicycle). Some of the terms in this class, such as *dictaphone*, *television*, *automobile*, etc., are hybrids, being half Latin and half Greek.

(f) 'Joke' words, originating in a pun on some Latin term. *Tandem* and *publican* have been mentioned already in another connexion (p. 141) *Omnibus* ('for all'), since abbreviated to *bus*, is substantially the same type of formation as *tandem*, and the slang *vim* is the accusative form of the Latin noun *vis* (strength)—pretty obviously a University witticism. Perhaps the oldest 'joke' word of this kind is *nostrum*, which the Oxford Dictionary dates as 1602. It is a Latin possessive adjective meaning *our*, i.e. 'our' remedy, as distinct from the one generally prescribed by the medical profession; hence a quack remedy.

Along with Latin we may also consider Greek, partly because it is the other classical language and partly because a very large proportion of those words in English which are derived ultimately from Greek were adopted by way of Latin. Direct borrowings do not become very numerous until the nineteenth century, when they were introduced by science. The few words of Greek derivation to be found in the Anglo-Saxon period, e.g. *engel* (angel) from the Greek *aggelos*, *preost* (priest) from *prebyter*, and *cirice* (church) from *kuriakon*, reached England through the intermediate stage of either Latin or Continental Germanic.



In the Middle English period, up to 1500, Dr. Serjeantson lists 97, but of these, again, 39 were only of ultimate Greek origin, having passed through Latin, and 58 (including words now so well known and common as *Bible*, *theatre*, *surgeon*, *logic*, *ecstasy*, *idiot*) came via French. As is to be expected, the biggest number arrived with the Renaissance. They include *acrobat*, *alphabet*, *asylum*, *bulb*, *chemist*, *chorus*, *cycle*, *character*, most of which were originally learned words but have since become popular; but still the vast majority were derived via Latin. For the period 1500–1800 Dr. Serjeantson's computation shows 99 words, made up as follows: through Latin 72; through French 15; direct from Greek 12. A selection of scientific and technical terms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is given on page 140, though we might add to these the names of a number of gases and chemical substances

The classical tongues apart, the most extensive borrowings have, of course, come from French during the Middle English period and since, and as we have seen already, they form a substantial part of the English language as it exists today; so much so that we have ceased to think of the majority of them as foreign at all, but have come to regard them as integral parts of the vocabulary of English. It is needless to cite examples from the earlier period, since a number have already been given in the chapter which deals with Middle English (see pp. 77–86), where we have also seen that, in most cases, when these words were first introduced the tendency was to preserve the foreign pronunciation and distribution of accent, but that in course of time they became anglicised. The same, however, is not generally true of those words borrowed from French at a later date. Thus words where the French pronunciation of *ch* is retained (e.g. *chef*, *sachet*, *chaperon*, *champagne*)

and in which the long *i* remains a pure, undiphthongised vowel (e.g. *machine*, *élite*, *clique*) have entered the language since 1500. Before that date the *ch* was hardened and the *i* became the diphthong *ai*, as in *fine*, *nice*, *guile*, etc. *Garage*, *barrage*, *négligé*, etc., in which the native French *g* is preserved before a front vowel, are likewise post-Renaissance borrowings, as are those words, exemplified in *coquette*, *burlesque*, *cajole*, *caprice*, *bagatelle*, *parasol*, etc., which retain their native distribution of accent, or something near it.

If the Middle English period was the most prolific in adding to the vocabulary words from the French, the process went on steadily throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus we have *portmanteau* (1584), *rendezvous* (1591), *coquette* (1611), *parole* (1616), *brigade* (1637). The next great period of French influence was in the years subsequent to the Restoration of 1660, when the Stuart Court returned from the Continent more French than English. To this period and to the eighteenth century belong mainly words relating to fashionable life and gaming or other 'polite' pastimes: *ballet*, *connoisseur*, *malapropos* (which later gave us the immortal Mrs. Malaprop), *beau*, *suite*, *belles-lettres*, *bas-relief*, *salon*, *boulevard*, *vignette*, *velours*, *cuisine*, *etiquette*, *début*, *fête*, *souvenir*, *route*, *morale*, etc. At the end of the eighteenth century the French Revolution supplied several words that persisted for a while but then died a natural death. About the only ones that have continued as part of the vocabulary of English are *régime*, *tricolor*, and *guillotine*.

'The nineteenth century', says Miss Serjeantson, 'introduced more French words into this country than any period since Middle English. The most numerous are those under the heads of Art and Literature, etc., Dress and Textiles, etc. The latter group, with furniture, are

perhaps the most typical of the century. It may be observed that the majority of the words in these two groups belong to the period between 1830 and 1860. Food and cooking are also well represented.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this increase are not far to seek. The mid-nineteenth century, be it remembered, was the great period of English liberalism, and it was therefore but natural that a new interest should be awakened in a country which was the home of the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity. Up to about 1830 France was still regarded as a potential enemy and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were not forgotten; but an age which was reading Byron and Shelley began to look back at the fall of the Bastille as the symbol of the overthrow of tyranny and the dawn of freedom. The new interest was rather like that which manifested itself in things Russian during the late twenties and the early thirties of the present century. Then there were also increased travel facilities, which led to more and more people going to France both for business and pleasure, and to the emergence of Paris as a centre of fashion and fine life. Gallicisms became a fashionable affectation. We have *café, restaurant, menu, bon-bon, mayonnaise, charlotte*, all connected with food and cooking. In dress and furnishings: *blouse, trousseau, costumier, modiste, rosette, beret, lorgnette, pince-nez, reticule, chignon*, etc. In military and political terms: *barrage, communiqué, chassis* (originally used of a gun-carriage), *attaché, chargé d'affaires*. Of vehicles: *cabriolet* (later shortened to *cab*) and *char-à-banc* (originally used of a horse-drawn vehicle), while from social life there are *parvenu, soirée, fiancé* and *débutant*.<sup>1</sup> Miss Serjeantson has compiled a very long list,

<sup>1</sup> Originally used only in the masculine. The feminine *debutante*, which is probably the more common today, was a later coinage by analogy.

but many of the terms included are merely 'period' ones and are now dead.

Finally we must not overlook those phrases like *coup d'état*, *bête noire*, *savoir-faire*, *hors d'œuvre*, *lettre de cachet*, etc., which, though they still retain their French form and are usually printed in italics to distinguish their foreign origin and character, have nevertheless been accepted into the English language and given an honourable place because they express ideas for which there is no equivalent or concise native term.

In his book, *The Growth and Structure of the English Language*, the Danish philologist, Otto Jespersen, attempted to estimate the strength of the influx of French words at different periods by taking at random from the Oxford Dictionary a thousand words of French origin and assigning them to the particular half-century when they first made their appearance in written English. The result is as follows:

Before 1050	-	2	1451-1500	-	76
1051-1100	-	2	1501-1550	-	84
1101-1150	-	1	1551-1600	-	91
1151-1200	-	15	1601-1650	-	69
1201-1250	-	64	1651-1700	-	34
1251-1300	-	127	1701-1750	-	24
1301-1350	-	120	1751-1800	-	16
1351-1400	-	180	1801-1850	-	23
1401-1450	-	70	1851-1901	-	2

It will be seen from this table that the greatest influx came between 1251 and 1400, the peak being reached in the last half-century of this period, after which there was a rapid falling off, though the adoption and naturalisation of French words continued steadily right up to the middle of the nineteenth century. We must, however, beware of

attaching undue significance to these figures: and for two main reasons. To begin with, Miss Serjeantson's statistics for the nineteenth century as a whole make us wonder how far Jespersen's thousand words are really representative. But more important is the fact that the century and a half from 1250 to 1400 was the flowering time of medieval English literature and included Gower, Chaucer, and Langland, to mention only three well-known names. Now in fixing the first appearance of a word in the language, a dictionary, of course, can only be approximate, in point of fact it can only record when it first appeared in written or printed documents. Such documents are fairly copious after 1250, but they are much rarer before that date, so that it is possible (and indeed probable) that many words which are first found recorded in Chaucer, Gower and their contemporaries had actually been in the language some years before. This would mean that the figures for the period 1250 to 1400 should be reduced somewhat and those for the earlier years raised. This, however, does not affect the general conclusion viz. that the greatest proportion of French words came into the English language between 1250 and 1400.

The Scandinavian element in English, as we have seen (pp 39-45), is also a large one, but the influence was confined mainly, though not exclusively, to the Anglo-Saxon and the Middle English periods, and by no means all the additions to the vocabulary which were made at that time have remained as permanent acquisitions. Again Miss Serjeantson's researches stand us in good stead. Of the numerous words of Scandinavian origin which she has found before the year 1016, when a peaceful solution of the 'Danish question' was reached by a division of the kingdom between Cnut and Ethelbert, only half have survived

to the present day. Most of them have to do with war and sea-faring. There are, however, a few which relate to more peaceful pursuits: *husband* (literally a house-dweller), *fellow*, *thrall*, *law*, *outlaw*, *egg* (in the sense 'to egg on') and *hustings* (originally a tribunal). The words introduced during the period 1016 to 1150 nearly all have to do with ordinary civil life 'an outcome of the pacification of the kingdom', but only a dozen are still in use today, namely *crooked*, *die*, *knife*, *haven*, *hit*, *root*, *sale*, *score*, *skin*, *snarl*, *take*, *they*, the last of which replaced the Old English *hie*. The Middle English period gave us *anger*, *boon*, *cast*, *meek*, *skill*, *want*, *gain*, *awe*, *ransack*, and *scant*. In the sixteenth century we find *smelt*, *slag*, *scud*, *scuffle*, *scrub* and *rug*; in the seventeenth *oaf*, *squall*, *keg*, *skittles*, *skewer* and the verb *to nudge*, in the eighteenth *cosy*, *muggy*, *saga* and *skald*, and from the nineteenth *vole* and *ski*. Of all the Scandinavian words now in the language only this last is recognisably foreign. The others have become so thoroughly assimilated that we should never think of regarding them as anything but English.

The most important and the most far-reaching influence of Norse, however, was not so much upon vocabulary as upon pronunciation, grammar and syntax and, to some extent, upon the development of dialect. As these have been treated in earlier chapters there is no need to repeat the facts here, the student is referred back to the appropriate pages.

The Celtic contribution has also been touched upon already (pp. 35-6). It is, comparatively speaking, small. Relics of the speech of the early Celtic inhabitants (Britons) are to be found in the words *binn* (a manger, giving our modern *bin*), *dunn* (dun-coloured), *torr* (a rock) and *comb* (a coomb), now found chiefly in place-names like Widdi-

combe, Seacombe, Woolacombe, Ulcombe, etc., scattered fairly widely over the country, though more frequent in the north-west and south-west. Irish missionaries of the seventh century also brought a number of Celtic words, but most of them did not survive even unto Middle English times. An exception is *ancor* (a hermit), still found today as an element of the term *anchorite*, though this was really a Celtic adaptation of a Greek word. Perhaps one of the reasons why they were so short-lived was that most of them were popular words, existing in the spoken language only, and because they were transmitted orally, and not through any literary tradition, they tended to die out.

Of Romance languages, next to French Italian has probably contributed the highest percentage of words. Many, like *alarm*, *brigand* and *florin* (from the town of Florence), came through French. Direct borrowing is confined mainly to two periods, viz., the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, the former being marked by a vogue for Italian travel and a birth of interest in Italian literature and art, the second by a craze for Italian opera and Italian singers on the London stage. In the mid- and the late sixteenth century numerous Italian romances or stories, some of which were used by Shakespeare as sources for his plays, were translated into English, and at about the same time, it may be recalled, the sonnet form was introduced into England from Italy by Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey. To this period belong the words *race* (1500), *contraband* (1509), *nuncio* (1528) now used almost exclusively of a papal diplomat, but originally meaning a messenger in a wider sense, *artisan* (1538), *carnival* (1549), *populace* (1572), *mountebank* (1577), *battalion* (1589), *bandit* (1593), *macaroni* (1599), *umbrella* (1609). The eighteenth century contributed mainly musical terms; *libretto*, *oratorio*, *pianoforte*

(literally 'soft loud,' it being possible to obtain on this newly invented instrument the variation that had been impossible on the harpsichord),<sup>1</sup> *concerto* and *falsetto*. A number of terms relating to the other arts are also Italian in origin: *campanule*, *cameo*, *sonnet*, *stanza*,<sup>2</sup> *canto*, *balcony*, *corridor*, *fresco* (so called because most of the original frescoes were executed on outside walls, i.e. in the open), *studio*, *mezzotint*, *motto*, *replica*, while amongst more general terms are *fiasco*, *conversazione*, *influenza*, *extravaganza*, *vendetta*, *costume*, *portfolio*, *dilettante*. This last word means, literally, the same as the French *amateur* (i.e. one who does a thing for the love of it or for the delight which he takes in it) and it has undergone the same declension of meaning that seems at present to be affecting its French counterpart. The most recent word to be adopted from Italy is a political one—*Fascist*. In ancient Rome the *fascēs* were the bundle of rods carried by the lictors before a civic procession. They were symbolic of law, order and submission to authority, and since, when Mussolini founded his party just after the Great War of 1914–1918, he claimed that it stood for these very principles, he called the movement *Fascismo* and its members the *Fascisti*, two words which have passed into English as *Fascism* and *Fascist* respectively.

If contact with Italy was mainly through cultural and artistic channels, that with Spain was through trade and commerce, and, spasmodically, through war. In Tudor times also there was a fairly close connexion between the

<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation to *piano* took place in the early nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> This is also the normal Italian word for the room of a house. Etymologically it means 'a resting-place'. Its application to poetry (which is, of course, the only sense in which it is used in English) probably depends upon the idea of a self-contained unit, at the end of which the poet pauses or rests before proceeding with his writing.



English and the Spanish Courts, for the first wife of Henry VIII was Katherine of Aragon, and 'Bloody' Mary Tudor had been brought up in her mother's native country. The opening up of trade with South America, too, had its influence. The bulk of Spanish words came into the language from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. *Armada*, though not generally regarded until very recently as an English word, has nevertheless been part of our vocabulary for many years and has always been used to describe the Spanish fleet which attacked England in 1588. Now there is a tendency to apply it to any large fleet equipped for attack, not only of ships but also of aircraft. From Spanish (or South-American Spanish) are also *mosquito*, *sherry* (originally *sherris*), *cañon* (now more frequently spelt *canyon*, to indicate the Spanish pronunciation by English literals), *grandee*, *negro*, *desperado*, *matador*, *anchovy*, *renegade*, *booby*, *galleon*, *comrade* (literally 'one who shares a room'), *bravado* (modified from *bravada*), *cargo*, *embargo*, *stevedore*, *esplanade*, *camisole* (in Spanish a man's shirt), *intransigent*, *punctilio*, *picaresque*, *autogiro*, *stampede*, and the modern *cafeteria*, besides the semi-colloquial *piccaninny* (from *pequeño niño*=little child.) *Vanilla* is adapted from Spanish *vainilla*, a diminutive of *vaina* (a pod, the reference being to the shape of the fruit of the plant in question); *banana* comes via Spanish from a South American native word, as *caraway* and *alligator* do from Arabic, the last-mentioned being a corruption of *el legarto* (the lizard), while *castanet* is an example of a Spanish word which has changed its meaning on being adopted into English, perhaps through ignorance or misunderstanding. To the Spaniard it means the action of flicking the fingers; the piece of bone to which we apply the word in England, in Spain is named *castañuela*. Then there are the phrases *good taste*

and *a point of honour*, both literal translations of corresponding phrases in Spanish; but it is possible that these may not have come direct.

From Portuguese only one word—*marmalade*—is to be found before the sixteenth century, and even that came into English through French (1480). The Portuguese element is, as a matter of fact, quite small. The only words worth noticing are *port* (the wine, from the town of Oporto, 1691), *caste* (1613), which, despite its usual association with the religious and social system of India, is really a European word, *tank* (1616), *palaver*, (1735) and *junk* (1555), now used to describe a flat-bottomed-Chinese boat. It may be added that our other word *junk* (rubbish), though originally also a marine term, has no connexion with this last, which was adopted into Portuguese from the East.

Dutch has supplied us on the one hand with words connected with ships and sailing, such as *yacht*, *yawl*, *smack*, *sloop*, *dock*, *deck*, *buoy*, *bulwark*, *cruise*, and on the other with a certain number relating to artistry, e.g. *easel* and *sketch*. Most of these were added to the language in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Then there are also *spool*, *spoor*, *aloof*, *plump*, *boor*, *uproar*, *wiseacre*, *smuggle* and *hop* (the plant), all about the same period, and from the Afrikaners Dutch of the Cape, in the later nineteenth century, the words *trek* and *veldt*, and more recently *apartheid*. It is mainly through the Boy Scout movement, itself an outcome of the Boer War, that the first of these three words has been popularised. Etymologically it is cognate with the English verb *to drag*, just as *veldt* is closely related to *field*.

On the whole we have shown ourselves less ready to adopt German words than those from most other

European languages This is not due to any kind of antipathy towards the Germans, but probably because they have had less to give us that we felt to be indispensable. We perhaps think of the Germans first and foremost as a nation of musicians on the one hand and of scientists (especially in the realm of physics) on the other. But long before we came into contact with them musically we had borrowed most of our musical terms from Italy. Germany, however, gave us *waltz*, *schottische*, *lieder*, *glockenspiel* and *yodel* (unless this last be counted as Swiss). As early as the sixteenth century German mining and metal workers had a European reputation, and it is from them that we get the names of some of our metals and minerals; *quartz*, *cobalt*, *nickel*, *zinc*. Secondly we think of them as philosophers and theorists, and here, in the field of abstract thought, they have also made their contribution. Thus we have adopted *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age), *weltanschauung* (outlook upon the word and life), *sprachgefühl* (feeling for language), *leitmotiv* (leading theme or motive) and the modern psychological term *gestalt*. In the military sphere they have given us *howitzer*, *minenwerfer*, *zeppelin* (named after Count Zeppelin, the inventor), *rucksack*, and, to come to quite modern times, *blitzkrieg*<sup>1</sup>; to their reputed

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally this term provides a good illustration of the way in which a word can undergo several successive modifications or changes of meaning within a comparatively short space of time. The original meaning was a 'lightning war' in the sense of a very quick and short war; but a war which had gone on for about fifteen months without anything decisive having occurred one way or the other could hardly be called a *blitzkrieg* in this sense, so by the end of 1940 the word had come to signify a war waged by lightning attacks of great intensity and ferocity. The next stage was the shortening of it to *blitz*: and since the attack, so far as it was directed against England, was solely one from the air, a severe air-raid became known, in popular

love of eating and drinking we owe *lager*, *carouse* (a corruption of the phrase *trinken gar aus*=to drink completely out, i.e. to the last drop) and *delicatessen*, while the words *poodle*, *dachshund*, *mangel-wurzel*, *kursaal*, *loaf* (in the sense 'to lounge about'), *seminar*, *kindergarten*, *hinterland*, and recently *anschluss* are also of German origin. Besides these, of course, there are various words and phrases like *Bismarckian*, *diplomacy*, *Prussianism*, *Nazism*, *Hitlerism*, *the Third Reich*, which, though not actually German themselves, have been coined to describe certain political developments in Germany. In course of time these will probably become obsolete.

With the exception of the early contributions in the field of metallurgy, the German influence was most potent in the nineteenth century, when contact and sympathy between the two countries was closest<sup>1</sup>. With Russia it is more recent still. Actual contact between England and Russia goes back to the time of Queen Elizabeth, when the Muscovy Company and the Skinners' Company were founded to develop trade in furs; but there was little political connexion until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and any real and widespread interest has only grown up since the Revolution of 1917. As can be realised, then, the most potent influence of the Russian upon the English vocabulary has been during the last fifty odd years, but for the past three and a half centuries an occasional word has been adopted.

parlance, as a *blitz*. From this developed the verb *to blitz* (to subject to severe and concentrated air attacks) and the adjective *blitzed*, still current (1948) in such phrases as *blitzed cities*, *blitzed buildings*, *blitzed sites*, etc. (i.e. severely damaged in an air-raid). How long the word will survive in any of these senses remains to be seen.

<sup>1</sup> See page 206 for a fuller discussion of this point

Thus we have *steppe*, *tundra*, *mammoth*, *Cossack*,<sup>1</sup> *pogrom* (literally 'a smashing-up,' but usually associated with a spoliation and massacre of the Jews), *droshky*, *ukase*, *samovar*, *vodka*, *borzoi* (a breed of dogs), *Duma*, *nihilist* and *nihilism* (though these last two, as any Latinist will immediately recognise, were themselves Russian coinages from a classical root) all from the old Russia; and from the new *bolshevik*, *soviet*, *commissar* and *kulak* (a rich peasant with bourgeois leanings) *Bolshevik* is actually a Russian coinage, dating from 1903 and meaning 'member of the majority'. The reference was to the famous conference, held in that year, of the Social Democratic Party, when the final split took place between the revolutionary and the evolutionary wings of the movement, and the revolutionary being in the majority the term *bolshevik* was adopted as a label. But since this section was committed to a programme of communism, in the English mind it became synonymous with *communist* and it was in this sense that it was adopted into the language after the Revolution of 1917. *Menshevik* (minority) was also in use for a while, but it failed to survive, probably owing to the liquidation of the moderate minority by the more extreme *bolshevik* element. *Soviet* has undergone a similar change. Its original meaning was 'a council' and it was applied to the workers' committees formed in each district or area at the time of the Revolution. The next stage of development was that the district itself, over which the soviet presided, became known as a soviet; and then the whole of Russia, because it was a union of republics each under a soviet (the initials U.S.S.R. stand for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) was named in England

<sup>1</sup> *Cossack* was probably borrowed by Russian itself from a Turko-Tatar tongue, and meant originally 'a wanderer', while *mammoth* comes ultimately from a tribal language in Siberia.

'Soviet Russia', or sometimes merely 'the Soviet' and its government 'the Soviet government'. To most English-speaking people to-day the original meaning has been entirely lost and it has come to be an adjectival synonym for Russian, while from it a verb *to sovietise* has been coined. Another word which we owe to modern Russia is *Ogpu* (discussed on p 125), while *intelligentsia*, though actually derived from a Latin root, has certainly come into common use as a result of the Revolution of 1917. Nowadays it is often used with a suggestion of depreciation.

From the lesser (or perhaps we ought rather to say the less well known) languages of Europe one or two words may also be recorded. *Bog*, *whisky* and *slogan* are from the Gaelic of Scotland, from Irish we get *galore*, *brogue*, *shamrock*, *Tory* and *blarney*, and *penguin* may possibly be of Welsh derivation, signifying 'white head'. *Hussar* comes from Hungarian and is first found in English in 1532, *mazurka* (the name of a dance) from Polish, while in recent years Czech has given us the term *robot*, a coined word signifying 'worker'. First introduced and popularised by the English translation of Karel Capek's play *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots), it is now used of any mechanical contrivance which performs the actions of a human being (e.g. automatic traffic signals which do the work previously performed by a policeman). *Polka* may also be of Czech origin, since the dance was introduced into England from Bohemia in the early nineteenth century. The word is probably an anglicised form of *půlka* (a half-step). From Turkish (if that may be considered European) come *jackal*, *turban*, *kiosk*, *horde*, *coffee*, *fez* and the colloquial *bosh*, while the slang *pal* (friend) and *rum* (in the sense of 'strange') have been attributed to Romany, the language of the gipsies.

To go from Europe to the East, from Persian we get

*caravan*,<sup>1</sup> *attar* (of roses), *divan*, *bazaar*, *shawl*, *dervish*, and (by way of French) *rice*, *scarlet*, *tiger*, *chess*, *checkmate*, *azure*, while Arabic has given us *orange*, *lemon*, *alkali*, *algebra*, *almanac*, *alchemy*, *elixir*, *bedouin*, *khalif*, *artichoke*, *zenith*, *assassin*, *harem*, *loofah*, *hazard*, *Moslem* and *Islam*. Many of these, and especially those which date back to the Middle Ages, were introduced via French; and by way of Spanish, as a result of the Moorish incursions into Spain, comes the word *mosque*. *Admiral* also is of Arabic origin, though originally it was *amiral* (high-one, or ruler). The *d* was probably introduced by confusion with, or on the analogy of, the verb *to admire* and the adjective *admirable*.

Hebrew has given us mainly religious terms, such as *Jehovah*, *Messiah*, *Alleluiah*, *manna*, *sabbath*, *psaltery*, though a number of them have lost their original Jewish significance and taken on a Christian colouring. A few Indian words began to trickle in from the time of the Seven Years War (e.g. *begum*); and *bungalow* and *cot* (a bed) are to be found as early as 1676 and 1634 respectively, though it was not until 1818 that the latter was used exclusively to denote a child's bed. It is to the nineteenth century, however, that the greatest number of Indian words belong, for it was then that India became increasingly important to England, and Englishmen went there in ever increasing numbers either as soldiers as civil servants or as traders. Thus we have *calico*, *cashmere*, *pyjamas*, *puttees*, *khaki*, *sahib*, *chutney*,

<sup>1</sup> In the original sense of a company of travellers journeying together, with their beasts and luggage. The more recent application of the term to denote a covered van equipped for living in probably arose from the fact that these vehicles were originally used by gypsies, who travelled in companies like the caravans of the East. The last syllable would suggest a connexion with the English *van* (and possibly the first with the verb *to carry*) so that the name of the whole procession of vehicles came to be applied to a single one of them.

*curry*, *dinghy*, *loot*, *pundit*, *gymkhana*, and *polo*. *Swastika*, too, is Indian, despite its later adoption and appropriation by the German Nazis. It was first mentioned in English in 1871. We have, too, taken a few words from the language of Malay, mainly the names of products of the district e.g. *sago*, *bamboo*, *raffia*, *teak*, *gutta-percha*, as well as *bantam*, *caddy* (a receptacle for tea), and the word *amok* (in the expression 'to run amok'), while from China we get *tea* and *rickshaw*, an abbreviation of *jinrickshaw*, while Japanese has given us *tycoon* (a business magnate).

To pass now to America, besides those words already listed in the paragraph dealing with the Spanish influence, we have *cocoa* (originally *cacao*) and *tomato* from Mexico, *tapioca* and *cayenne* (pepper)<sup>1</sup> from Brazil, *tobacco* and *potato* from Haiti, *maize* from Cuba, and from the Red Indians of North America *tomahawk*, *tom-tom*, *wigwam*, *totem*, *toboggan* and *moccasin*.

Of all the influences which have come to us from overseas in recent times, that from the United States is the most general and the most widespread, for American English is not a foreign language in the same sense that German, French, Italian and Spanish are; it is merely another variety of English, and its influence is daily brought to bear upon the masses through the media of television and literature—and especially literature of the more popular type. As we shall have more to say about this in the next chapter, we need not discuss it here. The pity is that so much of what passes for 'American' with our younger generation is American slang, and is not recognised as good spoken American at all.

<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian word was actually *kynha*, which was assimilated and corrupted to the place-name Cayenne on its adoption into English, though there was not the remotest connexion.



In spite, then, of the proverbial insularity of the English as a nation, linguistically they have shown themselves the most cosmopolitan of peoples. Or is it less a case of cosmopolitanism than of linguistic plagiarism? Proud as they are of their national and their literary heritage, they have rarely scrupled to take over a word from another language and make it their own if it suited their purpose to do so. They have never been great linguists. Until recently it was the exception rather than the rule to find an Englishman, even a well educated one, who could speak fluently any other language than his own, while business correspondence to foreign parts was very largely conducted in English. Yet it is significant that while almost all foreign countries give their own designation or title to a visitor from abroad, no matter of what nationality he is, we English continue to refer to him in his own native style, if he comes from a country that speaks German, French, Italian or Spanish; Herr Schmidt, M. Dubois, Signor Orlando, Señor Caballero, etc. Only for others do we use *Mr.*

[BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE. Since a detailed study of the foreign contribution is a specialised one, works dealing with the influence or contribution of specific languages have not been included in the general bibliography at the end of the book. For those who wish to pursue the subject, however, in one or other of its branches, a brief list is appended here. Miss Serjeantson's book, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, deals with the foreign contribution in general, devoting a section to each of the principal tongues. Then there are J. C. Smock's *The Greek Element in English Words* (New York, 1931) and E. Bjorkman's *Scandinavian Loan Words in Middle English* (Halle, 1900-1902). A great deal of valuable information has

been published in the tracts of the Society for Pure English, of which the following are the chief. The figure after each title represents the number of the tract in the series. Brander Matthews, *The Englishing of French Words* (v); Walt Taylor, *Arabic Words in English* (xxviii); A. A. Daryush, *Persian Words in English* (xli), R. C. Coffin, *Some Notes on Indian English* (xli); C. T. Carr, *The German Influence on the English Vocabulary* (xlii), G. N. Clark, *The Dutch Influence on the English Vocabulary* (xliiv), Sir William A. Craigie, *Northern Words in Modern English* (i), Sir William A. Craigie, *The Growth of American English* (lvi and lvii)].

## CHAPTER XI

### CONCLUSION

Now that we have surveyed the main trends of development in the history of our language, it remains for us to draw together the threads and to consider one or two questions which arise as a result of our investigations. It must, however, be emphasised that we have done no more than touch upon the fringe of a very wide subject. The present work claims to be merely an outline and an introduction, and this is all, in the nature of things, that it could be. It is impossible to study the history of the English language in any kind of detail in one small book, for scores of books have been written on each separate aspect of it. Five points should, however, by this time, be fairly clear to the reader who has worked through the preceding ten chapters: viz. (i) From Anglo-Saxon times onwards there has been a steady and continuous growth of vocabulary. This is due partly to historical factors and influences, partly to psychological processes. The result has been an increasing flexibility of diction, making for increased facility and exactitude of expression. (ii) The language has been enriched by foreign influences of all kinds, so that, far from being a 'pure' tongue, it is the most hybrid in the world. This again, on the whole, has been for the good. (iii) Side by side with these characteristics, which in a sense make for greater subtlety and complexity, in the field of grammar there has been a constant tendency towards simplification. Inflexions have

disappeared, natural has taken the place of grammatical gender, the subjunctive mood has fallen into almost complete disuse, and verb conjugations have been levelled under a few general types. (iv) Dialects have fallen into discredit, and in place of the many regional varieties of English which were both spoken and written up to almost the end of the fifteenth century, a 'Standard English' has emerged based upon the speech of educated people in London and the surrounding districts. (v) In the course of time very many words have undergone a change of meaning. Sometimes this has been for the good, sometimes for the bad, but whichever is the case, a study of these changes has important linguistic, social and psychological bearings. In short, it is plain that the underlying principle, at whatever aspect of the language we look, has been one of evolution, change and development. The English of today is not that of Shakespeare's age, as this latter was not that of Chaucer's; the vocabulary, the pronunciation, the spelling, the grammar, the values attaching to words are all different. And yet there is an essential unity underlying them all.

The contribution of foreign languages on the one hand and the changes in the meaning of words on the other are probably the most important and the most interesting of the five facts mentioned above, for it is to these above all that the English language, as we know it today, owes its specific character. If we were to compile a list of the more familiar words of foreign origin or derivation in English, we should find that each of the tongues represented had made its contribution for the most part to a particular side of our civilisation or our culture. For instance, most of the words for the commoner natural features, as well as for the commoner forms of

vegetable and animal life, are of native origin. So are the names of the nearer family relationships and the simpler kinds of tools and domestic utensils. *Sea* and *ship*, too, are English words, but most of our nautical terms come from Greek, Danish or Dutch. French has given us words to describe culinary processes and cooked foods, articles of clothing, articles of furniture and upholstery, as well as a number of things connected with the households of the well-to-do; in fact, terms which denote a certain degree of refinement and luxury which were unknown to the native Saxons. From Latin came ecclesiastical and legal terminology, while a great part of the vocabulary of learning is derived from the same source. Spanish, on the other hand, is chiefly responsible for terms which are connected directly or indirectly with trade and commerce, while the Italian contribution has been very largely in the field of the arts. Of the words connected with government, those concerned with the administrative side—*politics*, *politician*, *policy*, *police*, etc.—come from the Greek *polis* (city), while those which refer to citizenship and to the position of the individual under the administration—*civil*, *civics*, *civilian*, *civilization*, etc.—are derived from the Latin *civitas* (state) and *civis* (citizen). These facts, quite clearly, have a historical significance. They are the imprint left on our language by the development of our national life and institutions.

Words, like fashions in clothes and styles in literature or art, have their ups and downs. From earliest times there has been going on, as it were, a constant process of adoption and discarding, of promotion and relegation. In the early nineteen-thirties all our political interest was centred on shirts of one colour or another, but after a few years shirts were discarded in favour of fronts. With the death of the

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French Popular Front in 1937, however, and the fiasco of the attempt to form an English counterpart, fronts also ceased to be of interest. Social changes, too, lead to the introduction of new words and a discarding of old *Home-help*, *baby-sitting*, *baby-sitter*, *motorway*, *fly-over*, and *commute* (as applied to daily travel from home to work and vice versa) have all come in since the end of the 1939-45 war. Thirty years ago everyone would have understood what was meant by a *charwoman*. Quite recently a question put to several classes of grammar-school boys showed that most of them had never heard the word, and the few who hazarded a guess at its meaning thought that it meant a woman in a works canteen who made and brought round the tea. This kind of thing has been going on all through history. Words which not so many hundred years ago were in use amongst the common folk and were understood by all, are today intelligible only to the scholar or have been reserved for the use of poets. But, on the other hand, a number of words which, on their first appearance, were distinctly learned, academic terms, have since become popular. *Humour*, as most people know, is one of them, though its meaning has changed considerably since the Middle Ages, when it was employed by medical science to describe the various 'fluids' which were supposed to reside in the human anatomy and so influence the temperament. *Humorous*, then, meant *temperamental*, and it bears this connotation in *As You Like It*, when the Duke Frederick is described as 'humorous' and Jaques is said to be afflicted with 'a humorous melancholy'. Even today we employ it in a kindred sense when we speak of a person being in a good or an ill humour; but in its more common acceptation it has come to denote one particular kind of temperament.

*Contradict*, too, was at one time a learned word, the older and more common term being *to gainsay*; and it is only in very recent times that *arbitrate* and *arbitration* have become part of the vocabulary of the man in the street. Incidentally it is to be noted that *arbiter* is still not a popular word, probably because it has never been used by the daily press in connexion with labour disputes or international questions in the same way that the other two have.

Then there is the question of slang, which, again, is very largely a matter of fashion. We have seen already how slang words have, in course of time, attained to respectability and been admitted into the language, but in a few cases there has been a movement the other way, and a word which at one time was quite 'good English' has fallen into disrepute and finally come to be regarded as what Dr. Johnson would have called 'low'. A typical example is the modern *shove*, which no one today would have the slightest hesitation in pronouncing vulgar. Yet in Anglo-Saxon it (or rather *scūfan*, from which it is derived) was in regular use. In the Middle English period, however, it was superseded by *push*, which, probably because it came from the French *pousser*, was considered more genteel and respectable. From that time *shove* began to lose caste. *Niman*, likewise, was the Anglo-Saxon verb meaning 'to take'; but *nim* now only survives in dialectal slang, as does *flit* (to remove) and *lief*, which is frequently corrupted to *live* by the uneducated. Another interesting word which has suffered a similar declension is the Anglo-Saxon *lācan* (to play). As *lake* it is still to be found in some districts of North and North-East England, and it appears again in the slang expression 'to lark about', while in the Barnsley district of South Yorkshire it is used not only in its literal sense but also metaphorically, as a

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synonym for 'to be unemployed or temporarily out of work', the implication being, apparently, that when one is not working one is playing. There is a story told locally of a collier who, during the depression period of the 1930's when most miners were on short time, went into the Midlands and was asked where he came from.

'From the Lake District,' he replied

'What town?' asked the questioner.

'Barnsley.'

'But Barnsley is not in the Lake District.'

'Yes, it is; we work one half of the week and lake the other half.'

A few words, too, have been debased by being employed as euphemisms for terms of questionable taste or propriety. No poet nowadays would dare to write, as one could a century or so ago,

Now nature hangs her garb of green  
On every blooming tree.

And Sir Toby Belch's 'bloody coxcomb' is apt to call forth a smile from many modern spectators or readers of *Twelfth Night*, while since the recent adoption of *toilet* for *lavatory* the employment of it in its earlier sense is liable to lead to misunderstanding. Again, there are a number of very common Old English words which were indispensable in their day but which are now only preserved in compounds or derivatives. *Hrað* (or *rað*=soon), survives only in the comparative form *rather*; *ruth* (pity), though occasionally found in poetry, is obsolete so far as the spoken language is concerned, though it is perpetuated in the adjective *ruthless*, just as the verb *reck* (care) is preserved in *reckless*. In words like *home*, *stead*, *farmstead*, and even *instead* we have the Anglo-Saxon noun *stede* (place), while *wedding* and *wed-*



*lock*, as we have seen, embody an ancient noun *wedd*, meaning 'a pledge'. The verb *list* (to desire) is no longer part of the living vocabulary of English. Everyone knows the Biblical 'the wind bloweth where it listeth', and Macaulay revived the word in the opening line of his poem on the Spanish Armada:

'Attend, all ye who list to hear our noble England's praise.'

But even here it was something of a curiosity. It is still to be found, however, in the adjective *listless* (literally 'without desire'). In *garlic* we have the Anglo-Saxon *gar* (a spear), though the word itself became defunct many centuries ago. *Garlic* means 'spear-leak', the reference being to the shape of the leaves. An ancient *lic* (a corpse) occurs in the *lychgate* of a church (the porch under which the bier was rested before entering the building), as well as in the noun *lykewake* (a wake, or watch, held over a body after death); and the Middle English verb *sty* (to climb: cf. Anglo-Saxon *stigan*, Modern German *steigen*, etc.) is to be found in *stirrup* (literally 'a climbing rope'), while the older sense of *favour* (face) remains in the adjective-combination *ill-favoured*, but the simple word itself is now employed only in the metaphorical and abstract sense—save in the proverb *Kissing goes by favour*, where it is usually misunderstood.

The fact is that words have no fixed, intrinsic meaning. They are vehicles for the conveyance or expression of thoughts and ideas, and they only mean what we choose to make them mean. They cannot, of course, be used arbitrarily, each person attaching to them whatever meaning he chooses, for that would lead to chaos and would defeat its own ends, since no speaker or writer would be in-

telligible to anyone but himself, and words would conceal meaning instead of expressing it. In every generation there must be a consensus of opinion as to what a word signifies; but that consensus of opinion may not be in complete agreement with the opinion of a few generations earlier. To the Romans a *volume* was a scroll (from the verb *volvere*, to wind or go round); but as the early books were scrolls of parchment it took on a secondary meaning which in course of time tended to displace the first. Modern books are made on a different principle, but we still retain the term *volume* in reference to them. In the same way the word *rivals* (Latin *rivales*) has lost all trace of its original signification, which was connected essentially with a river or stream. *Rivales* were people who shared the same bank in order to obtain water from the same river or stream. As can be imagined, jealousy and controversy regarding their rights to a particular stretch of the bank were fairly frequent, and so, with the lapse of time, *rivals*, and the noun *rivalry*, lost their connexion with a stream and came to denote the competition or conflicting claims of two people for the same object. *Education* at one time meant *upbringing*, in the general sense, from infancy to manhood or womanhood, and it still has a signification akin to this when we speak of manners and courtesy being acquired through education; but the more general use of the word nowadays makes it synonymous with *learning*. Or again, take the word *religion*, perhaps one of the vaguest and therefore the most misleading and most conducive to dispute and controversy in the English language. There is no doubt that the original sense of it (Latin *religio*) was the performance of certain rites and ceremonies which were binding on people (*ligare*=to bind). But the highest forms of religion today would certainly disclaim any such

belief in the efficacy of mere mechanical practices, and Christianity, as well as most of the other great faiths of the world, teaches that religion is a way of life. Here, then, the root meaning of the word has virtually been reversed. Even more uncertain is the precise meaning of the adjective *religious*. One speaker may describe someone as 'a very religious person' and it will be the highest tribute he can pay him, but on the lips of another it will be a term of disparagement. And then there is what may be called the neutral sense of the word, as in such expressions as 'a religious order', 'a religious ceremony', etc. Today enthusiasm is regarded as a commendable quality, but in the first half of the eighteenth century it suggested what would now be called fanaticism; and *respectable*, which only a generation ago was a term of approval, is now used with a suggestion of depreciation if not of actual contempt. In such cases the precise shade of meaning to be attached to a word depends very largely upon the context in which it occurs or the psychology of the individual or the age employing it.

But there are also other factors which help to give value to words or combinations of words, especially in the case of the spoken language. For instance, the tone of the voice, the placing of the emphasis, etc. They all betray our mental attitude to the things we speak about. Thus pronounced in one way the sentence,

*This is a fine piece of work*

is a sober statement of fact, but pronounced in another it becomes ironic, and in still a third it implies admiration. The words are the same in each case, but the way they are uttered makes all the difference to the value attaching to them. Or a question may be a rhetorical one or one

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that is asked to elicit information. Again the actual words will be the same in both cases, but there will be a wide difference between the meanings, and it is the emphasis, the pitch of the voice, etc. that makes this difference clear. It is exceedingly difficult to reproduce these subtleties in writing. We have, of course, symbols to indicate the more common vocal inflexions—the question mark, the exclamation mark and even the rather crude device of underlining or printing in italics for emphasis—but further than this we have been unable to go.

As has been stated earlier (p. 260), there is such a thing as social convention in language, just as there is in dress and behaviour. We all know that it is impolite to ask a speaker to repeat a statement we have not heard clearly by hurling at him the curt, blunt ‘What?’, and that it is polite to say, ‘I beg your pardon’, while the rather snappy ‘Beg pardon’, though not so boorish as ‘What?’, is far from courteous. There is no real reason why ‘What?’ should be impolite, for there is nothing intrinsically vulgar or rude about it; in fact, it is a far more sensible way of indicating that we have not heard than is the generally accepted form, since we are not really asking pardon for our omission or failure. And if we can say, ‘Thank you’ for ‘I thank you’ without giving offence or being considered ill-bred, why not ‘Beg pardon’ for ‘I beg your pardon’? Merely because it is not done. Social convention dictates otherwise.

Again, we have seen that a social-cum-psychological interest attaches to those words like *villain*, *churl*, *boor*, etc. which have undergone a degeneration of meaning. They show quite clearly the attitude of the refined, cultured classes of the community towards those of humbler station; and the same is true of *knaves* and *varlets*, both of which meant

nothing more than *servant* in the earlier stages of their history. Even the adjective *plebeian* has come to have a disparaging suggestion about it, despite the fact that in the sense in which it was used by the Romans it would apply to all that were outside the 'upper tenth' and would certainly include many who today consider themselves 'gentle-folk'. *Cheat* is of interest from a different point of view. The deterioration of this word reflects the universal dislike of the tax-collector, for an *escheator* (in the Middle Ages) was an official who went round claiming lands for the crown when no heir for them could be found or when they had become involved in legal complications. Like the Roman publicans of former times he seems to have become notorious for dishonest practices, and so the verb to *escheat*, later abbreviated to *cheat*, acquired the evil sense which it bears today.

And now arises the question, what is likely to be the future of the English language? We have traced out its evolution in the past; what line of development may we expect it to follow in the years immediately ahead? That, obviously, is a difficult question to answer; but perhaps an answer may suggest itself if we consider for a moment one or two of the main tendencies observable at the present time, along with certain factors that in all probability will be operative during the next decade or so.

Today even serious writing, which pretends to some degree of literary style, is much less formal than it used to be, often verging on the familiar and colloquial, and this tendency will probably persist. In the second place a certain amount of what is now regarded as slang will probably be absorbed and elevated to an honourable position in the vocabulary. There is no cause for regret or misgiving over this. It has happened throughout the history of the lan-

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guage and has usually been for the good and, of course, only a small proportion of the unorthodox, racy language of modern youth will thus survive. A great deal of slang is, always has been, and always will be, ephemeral. It has been said, and with a great deal of truth, that nothing is so dead as last year's slang—unless it be last month's popular song.

It is noticeable, too, that people are becoming less squeamish about using, in both speech and writing, words that up to a generation ago were taboo on grounds of morals, delicacy or good taste. We may feel that this is sometimes carried too far; but we may console ourselves with the thought that the extreme form is merely a passing fashion, the outcome of a spirit of rebellion and daring, and that in course of time we shall settle down to a sensible middle way.

Then there is the question of the American influence. The character of the American language is essentially different from that of our own, owing partly to its having developed against a different social and political background, and partly to the fact that the population of the United States is today so cosmopolitan in character. American English is much less conservative, and much less impatient of innovation than is its British counterpart. In the past, whenever the advance of civilisation has brought new ways of life or new inventions have been made, the British have had a habit of retaining the long-established words associated with the older methods and applying them to the new, though in the strict sense they may not have been actually applicable. Take, for instance, the case of the railway. *Coach, guard, driver, booking-office*, to mention only a few typical and characteristic words, all come from the old coaching days. The Americans speak of a *car*,

*a trainman, a conductor, an engineer, and a ticket office.* What to us is a lift to them is an elevator, and where we speak of a shop, to them it is a store; for in the early nineteenth century, when a large part of the American continent was still undeveloped and transport was difficult, the local retail establishment was also a warehouse. Even by the beginning of the present century some of these terms were creeping into British English, so that a few years later H. W. and F. G. Fowler's *The King's English* found it necessary to give some attention to them (mainly in order to denounce them), and for more than a generation after that 'American' and 'Americanism' were commonly used by writers on the English language as terms of condemnation; but the tide was not stemmed.

The American influence upon British English became particularly marked from the time of the 1939-45 war partly as a result of English people's contact with American servicemen during and immediately after the war; partly because of increasing business contacts between the two countries; partly owing to a growing popularity of American literature in Britain (not all of it of the highest literary quality); partly through the increasing international prestige of America; but most of all through the influence of television, on which so many American plays and films appear, with the result that so much American speech is heard, and comes, unconsciously, to be copied.

Spelling has been little affected, but signs of the American influence on pronunciation are seen in the tendency (especially amongst the young) to pronounce *deity* as *day-ity*; to say *lew-* instead of *lef-* for the first syllable of *lieutenant*, to pronounce the sound *sk* at the beginning of *schedule*, instead of *sh*; and to stress the third syllable of *temporarily* instead of the first. On the side of grammar we now some-

times hear *gotten* and *proven* as the past participles of the verbs *to get* and *to prove* (e.g. 'This theory was later proven wrong'), in questions concerning ownership or possession *do you have?* is now quite common, where until quite recently British English would always have asked *have you?* or *have you got?* (e.g. 'Have you (got) a Latin dictionary you could lend me?'), and *will* is rapidly usurping the place of *shall* as the auxiliary in the first persons of the future tense of verbs.

But it is in the field of vocabulary that the influence is most apparent. There has for some time been an increasing tendency to use *mail* for *post* or *letters* (e.g. 'I have not opened my mail yet'), and to speak of *mailing*, instead of *posting* a letter or a parcel, though this change, while due to American influence, has probably been helped by the fact that the word *mail* has for some years been used by British English itself in compounds like *mail coach*, *mail train*, *mail bag*, *the Royal Mail*, and in more recent times *air mail* and *mail order*. The euphemisms *toilet* (a lavatory) and *diaper* (a baby's napkin) we also owe to America, though both words were used previously in British English, but in different senses. When, in her *Dictionary of American-English Usage* (1957) Margaret Nicholson described the former as 'chiefly U.S.' she may not have been quite up to date in her knowledge of the extent to which it had been adopted on our own side of the Atlantic (she is not always accurate on other points also), but today it is to be found and heard almost as frequently in Britain as in America. *Presently*, used in America in the sense of 'at the present time' ('Dr. Simpson is presently engaged on compiling a dictionary of Americanisms in present-day English') is beginning to appear in Britain, where it is a re-introduction of what is almost (but not quite) the Elizabethan use of



the word, which has now been obsolete in this country for about three hundred years. The rather slovenly habit (at least, so it strikes most educated and well-spoken people in Britain) of speaking of, and writing, *a barber shop* and *teacher organisations* (thus dropping a sibilant in speech and the apostrophe *s* in writing) also comes from America, as do *bottle beer* in place of *bottled beer*, *fry pan* for *frying-pan*, and *swim suit* for *swimming-suit* (more often in British English called a *bathing-costume* or *bathing-suit*). These are only a few examples.

We must expect British English to be increasingly affected by American usage and idiom. This is not necessarily in itself a bad thing, nor need it be deplored. The danger is that it may produce a kind of hybrid language which is neither one nor the other, for many of the American borrowings seem to be misfits in the language of Britain.

There are also certain tendencies in British English itself which give grounds for concern; and not the least of them is the debasement of the language by officialese, and by a loose and unthinking use of words like *awful*, *loathsome*, *beastly*, *terrible*, *tremendous*, *amazing*, *tragic*. Now *awful* means 'awe-inspiring', and awe is very different from fear, and still more different from mere unpleasantness. It is therefore quite meaningless to say 'I had an awful time' or 'I have an awful headache'; and the height of absurdity is reached in the sentence 'He was such an awfully nice boy'. How often do the things or the experiences which we describe as 'terrible' really arouse terror in us; and how many of the 'tremendous successes' of which we read in our daily papers would actually make us tremble: for that is what *tremendous* means? All these words have become degraded by habitual misuse until, as one writer has complained recently, they have become

lies. This kind of slipshod, inaccurate speech and writing threatens to enfeeble the language, and anyone who has a love of his mother-tongue cannot but regret it. Dr. Johnson realised the danger as long ago as the middle of the eighteenth century, when he declared that language had a natural tendency to degeneration against which we must be constantly on our guard, and in our own day Sir Alan Herbert (A. P. Herbert), Ivor Brown, and Sir Ernest Gowers have continually denounced the inaccuracy and disregard of precision in the use of words. (A recent example is to be found in the way that *shambles* is being used in the sense of 'a scene of chaos or disorder', and *menace* as though it were synonymous with 'nuisance' or 'something that annoys one'). But this is not all. There is, too, that snappy, ungrammatical, non-syntactical English which we find in the headlines of newspapers and which the masses of us imbibe every morning, evening and week-end. Often ambiguous, sometimes quite meaningless, it nevertheless serves, unconsciously it may be, as a model of style for large numbers of people.<sup>1</sup> 'Mother of Ten Sent to Prison' ran a headline in a daily paper a few months ago. It was only on reading the article beneath that one discovered that the mother in question was not so young as at first appeared; that she was, in fact, a middle-aged woman, and that the word *ten* referred, not to her age, but to the number of her family. Or again, in a London daily of fairly high standing, during the war years: 'Roosevelt Puts Pro-Ally Opponents in Cabinet.' It took some few moments to puzzle out exactly what this meant.

<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this is not intended as, nor does it constitute, a refutation of Sir Ifor Evans's assertion, in his *Short History of English Literature*, that 'the level of our newspaper prose has been improved far above any popular estimate' during the last thirty or forty years.

Another characteristic of this 'headline English' is that it reduces all words with similar or closely related meanings to one common denominator, and so tends to blur fine distinctions and to produce a kind of flatness of style. Any kind of dispute, disagreement or difference of opinion becomes a *row*; any person who is in a position of authority over others is a *boss*; anyone who is rebuked or reprimanded is *rapped*; and anyone who is discharged or relieved of his position is *sacked*. *Redundant* is being used so frequently by newspapers nowadays that people are coming to regard it as a synonym of *out of work*. It does not, of course, mean that; though the fact that a person is redundant may result in his being out of work—on the other hand, it may not. A firm, either out of generosity or for its own ends, may continue to employ a certain number of people who are really redundant.

But if these tendencies give cause for concern, there is also the other side, which should not be overlooked. The extension of library services, and the spread of education among the masses, not only during childhood but also in later life, should have their effect. This is said in the full realisation that popular education is not all that it might be, or all that teachers and educationists had hoped that it would become. But despite its failures and its shortcomings, it is probably true to say that today there is a higher standard of speech amongst people generally than ever there was, and that the man in the street is reading a better type of literature than at any previous time. It is an encouraging sign, too, that in responsible quarters English is receiving more serious attention than it has formerly done in the whole of its history. Time was (and not so long ago) when it occupied a very subordinate place in the curricula of secondary and grammar

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schools, and was relegated to anyone to teach. Now it has become the basis of the curriculum and is entrusted only to specialist teachers. And there are bodies like the English Association which are continually vigilant in urging the claims of our mother-tongue and promoting any movement for spreading a knowledge of it, preserving it and rescuing it from debasement. Every generation has, no doubt, felt apprehensive about the future, and all those tendencies and developments which today we see have on the whole been for the good, were viewed by the majority of contemporaries with misgiving. In every age we find complaints that the purity of the language is being threatened by innovation, by slackness, by indifference to long-established usage. And to some extent the complaints were probably justified. But there is an indefinable something which we call 'the genius of the language' that has always triumphed. There is no reason to suppose that it will not continue to do so; but that does not mean that we should not collaborate with it. To let things drift, in the belief that they will put themselves right and all will turn out for the best in the end, is no more intelligent in language than it is in politics or economics.

English began as an obscure tongue, spoken in a remote and unimportant corner of the world. Today it is the most important of all living languages. Partly because of the commercial advantages, partly because of conquest followed by industrial development, partly because of emigration and colonisation, and partly, again, because it opens up one of the world's greatest literatures, it is not only the native speech of large communities scattered over various parts of the earth's surface, but it is a second language to numbers of people in many different lands. It is studied in most universities throughout the five conti-

nents, all of the larger countries and many of the smaller have their Anglophile societies, and the British Council is doing much good work in developing its study in distant parts as well as in those centres of culture nearer home. It has even been suggested that it might become the 'universal language' if such a proposition ever becomes feasible. In comparison with an artificial tongue like Esperanto, and even with a number of the other living languages, its disqualifications for this purpose are obvious enough. There is the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation, which proves a stumbling-block to most foreigners; and the very richness of the vocabulary, with the consequent nice and subtle distinctions between words, makes it more difficult to master. But against these objections we have to set the comparative simplicity of its grammar and the fact that already it is well on its way to becoming a *lingua franca* in most of the larger and more highly developed countries. A census taken in 1866 showed that then sixty million people spoke English out of 242 millions; in 1921 it was one hundred and seventy out of 488 millions (about 25 per cent. and 35 per cent. respectively).<sup>1</sup> Today the proportion is probably higher still.

Perhaps the most hopeful sign of the continued vitality of the language—and the best guarantee for it—is the fact that Englishmen themselves are at last coming to take an interest in its history. It may seem a curious and an incredible fact that any nation could ever be indifferent to the claims of its own tongue, but such has been the case. Until very recently all the important work had been done by German, Danish and Dutch scholars, and their books

<sup>1</sup> The other languages taken into account in each case were French, German, Spanish and Russian

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are still, for the most part, the standard works. One has only to mention such names as Max Muller, Jespersen, Kluge, Sievers Poutsma, Kruisinga and Zandvoort. In England the classical tradition in education had been so strong that it effectively stifled any real interest in the native language. But with the decay of this tradition things have changed. Walter Skeat, Henry Bradley and H. C. Widdows are three names which are known wherever English is studied, and 'language' now forms an important side of English studies in all our Universities. Generally speaking, however, it finds no place in any other part of our educational system, nor do library statistics give us reason to believe that it receives much attention from the general reading public save from those who are compelled to study it either for examinations or for professional purposes. One cannot but feel that here there is something wrong. It is generally accepted that every intelligent person should know something about the history of the country—and if possible of the world—in which he lives, of the literature which he reads, of the trade or profession which he follows, of the religion to which he professes allegiance. Why not, therefore, of the language which he speaks? It is in the belief that there is a real necessity for this, and that one of the most certain ways to ensure an intelligent use of any language is to study it historically, that the present book has been written.

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